South Haven Tribune

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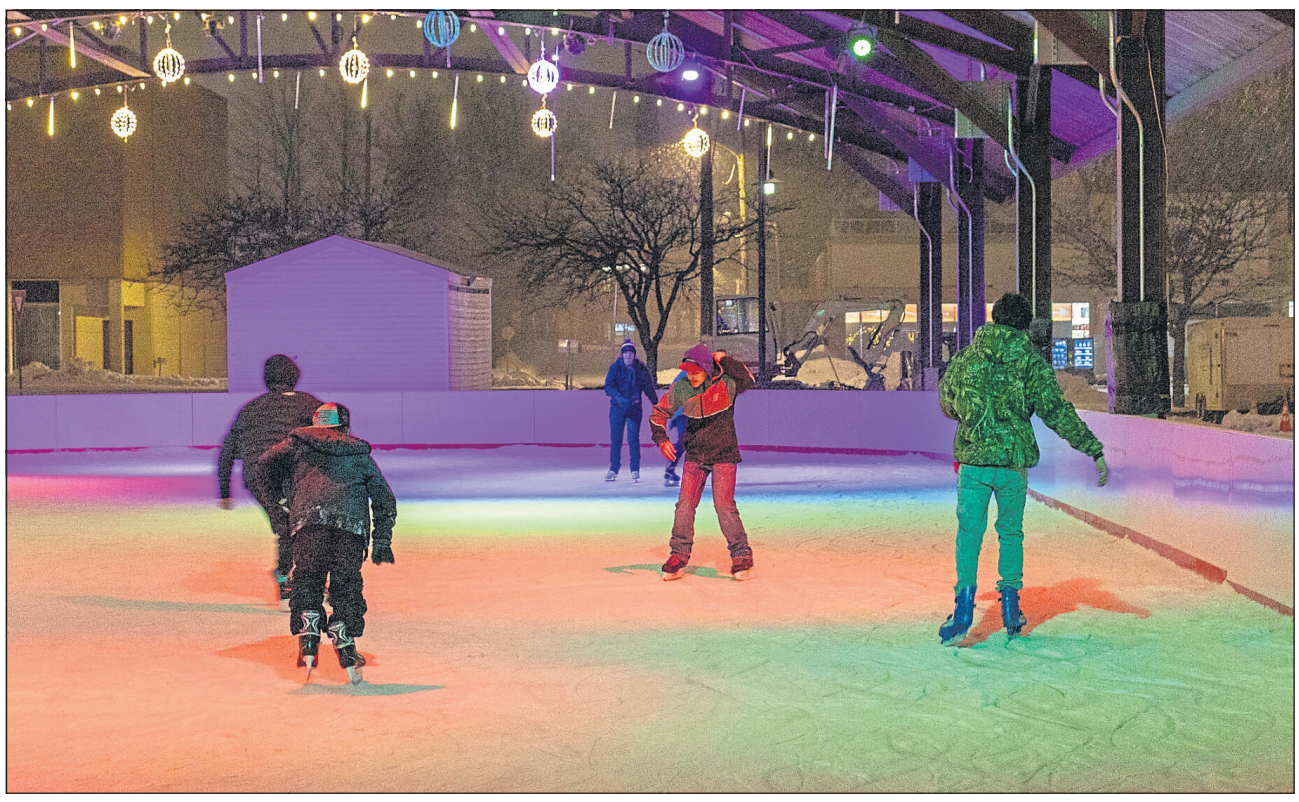
December 7, 2025



Photos by Julie Newell / Tribune Editor

South Haven residents braved the cold and snow Wednesday to enjoy the newly, updated ice rink.

Chilling updates

South Haven ice rink in line for new cooling system

By JULIE NEWELL
SH Tribune Editor

The Huron Street Pavilion is used as an ice rink in downtown South Haven every winter. The pavilion and ice rink are set to get a new chilling system next year.

SOUTH HAVEN — The Huron Street Pavilion in downtown South Haven is used year-round for a variety of events and activities, but when the snow begins to fall in the winter, the pavilion is transformed into an ice rink.

After years of use, the pavilion and the ice rink are now in need of updates.

Downtown Development Authority Director Suzanne Brock said the board has been discussing the needed updates for a couple of years.

"I would say the past couple years, the DDA board has been in discussion about the ice rink, because we knew that we had to replace our chiller (and) we knew we had to replace the cooling system," Brock said.

The discussions led to the discovery that the cooling system could be buried under the pavilion, which would eliminate the need to install and uninstall the chillers and cooling system for the ice rink every year.

"They bring in loads of gravel to even it out because there's kind of like a step up lip to it in the middle," Brock said. So, they have to even that out and make sure it's perfectly even to do that. Then they put up the walls and they lay down the coils, then they put layers up, they freeze the ice. It could take up to two weeks just to get that rink in ready for use. Now with this new cooling system, we won't need to gravel and it won't take all that manpower."

To fund the project, the DDA applied for a grant, but did not receive the funds.

"The DDA board, they said they were going to fund it regardless if we had the grant or not," Brock said. "We didn't get the grant, so they said they still wanted to fund it because if we buried the cooling system underneath, we would have to replace it anyway. So they decided to move forward on that."

During the Nov. 2 meeting, the South Haven City Council approved a resolution to issue bonds to help cover the cost for the project.

The $2.6 million bonds were issued to run for 45 days.

"In the last three or four months is when we really solidified the financial piece of it – the bonds we took with city council, they would approve that we could take out the bond to pay for this project and the DDA would pay for the bond," Brock said.

Part of the improvement project included updating the electrical system in the pavilion.

"What we've done already is in the pavilion area, we have replaced all of the

See **ICE RINK**, page A2

South Haven approves first phase of Overton project

Site plan includes multi-family renting, homeownership

By JULIE NEWELL
SH Tribune Editor

SOUTH HAVEN — The South Haven City Council approved the first phase for a concept design of the Overton redevelopment project from Dwelling Place.

The 5.5-acre redevelopment project has been in the works and the subject of conversation for the city council for several years.

"This is a step that we thought would be good to get the buy-in from council, just to make sure that Dwelling Place is on the right track before sending them through the planning and zoning process," City Manager Kate Hosier said.

Dwelling Place Land Acquisition and Development Analyst Matt Szuminski presented the concept plans to the city council during Monday's meeting.

The site plan for the Overton project includes two components – multi-family rental and community land trust homeownership.

Phase one will focus on the multi-family renting component. The proposed plan is to have a three-story apartment building with 53 one- and two-bedroom apartments with 60 to 80 parking spots along with building amenities including a community room, rooftop garden and leasing office.

Phase two will focus on homeownership. The proposal includes 20 total homes with 10 duplexes and two single-family homes. The homes will be two stories tall with three to four bedrooms, up to two bathrooms, a driveway and a garage.

The final concept plans for phase two are not finalized yet and could change in the future.

Dwelling Place recently held three public engagement meetings where they presented the plans for the property and answered questions from the community.

"Throughout these sessions, we've come up with a plan that we are very excited about," Szuminski said. "We think it meets a lot of the city's needs, it meets the state's needs and we're really looking forward to really putting this project proposal together and then submitting it on April 1 to MSHDA."

Dwelling Place representatives will present their concept plans for approval for phase one to the South Haven Planning Commission during a Jan. 8 meeting.

If approved, the developers can then send all the necessary paperwork to MSHDA and Low-Income Housing Tax Credit for funding approval on April 1.

If approved for funding, they will close the deal and begin construction.

For more information and to keep up to date on the project, go to dpgr.org.

Other items

The city council approved the special event Rotary Pancake Breakfast to be held from 6:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. on July 5 at the Huron Street Pavilion.

South Haven police officers Michael Ledger, Luke Keene and Kevin Wildey were promoted and sworn in as sergeants during Monday's meeting.

Council Member Joe Reeser reflected on his eight years of service on the city council during the meeting. Reeser said he will be unable to attend the last meeting of the year on Dec. 15 due to family issues, so Monday marked his final meeting on the city council.

"First, it has been an honor to serve," Reeser

See **OVERTON**, page A2

Holtec secures $400M in federal funds for Palisades

By TRIBUNE STAFF

COVERT — The Department of Energy recently announced a $400 million investment in Holtec to deploy two next generation small nuclear reactors at the Palisades nuclear plant in Michigan.

According to a news release, this will double the site's generation capacity and provide enough power for 1.4 million households and businesses.

"Today's announcement will lower energy costs, reaffirm Michigan's clean energy leadership, and show the world that we are the best place to do business," said Governor Gretchen Whitmer said in the release. "This historic investment will double Palisades' capacity, provide more clean energy for Michigan homes and businesses, and protect good-paying Michigan jobs."

The department's investment will help Holtec deploy two SMR-300 advanced nuclear reactors at Palisades generating 600 megawatts of safe, reliable, clean energy in addition to the 800 megawatts already generated by the site.

"By restarting Palisades, we will make history as the first state to reopen a shuttered nuclear plant," Whitmer said in the release. "I'll keep working with anyone to grow Michigan's economy and build a more affordable, clean energy future right here in Michigan. Let's keep getting it done."

This investment builds on last year's announcement to make Michigan the first state in the country to successfully reopen a shuttered nuclear power plant.

"Together, these investments will provide clean, reliable energy for 1.4 million homes, and protect 900 jobs, many of them filled by workers who have been at the plant for more than 20 years with approximately 45 percent of the workforce at the site being good-paying union labor upon restart," the release stated.

The Department of Energy recently finalized a $1.52 billion loan agreement with Holtec International to aid in the restart of the Palisades Nuclear Power Plant. The United States Department of Agriculture also awarded $1.3 billion to support the restoration of service at the plant and lower energy costs, including a $650 million grant to Wolverine Power Cooperative to reduce the cost of power produced at Palisades.

"Holtec is taking an innovative approach to nuclear reactor deployment at every stage in the process, from setting up the reactors to selling the electricity they generate," the release stated. "The State of Michigan was proud to support Holtec's successful application for the DOE's Gen III and SMR program."

The Tribune: Celebrating Our 126th Year

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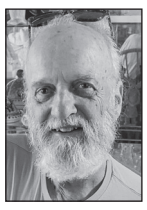
Support the Local Businesses Who Help Support Our Community!

OBITUARIES

Terry Tatsch

Jan. 22, 1949 – Nov. 23, 2025



Terry Alan Tatsch, born Jan. 22, 1949, in Alliance, Ohio, passed away on Nov. 23, 2025, in South Haven, Mich. after a short battle with cancer.

A geologist, educator and former Saugatuck bed-and-breakfast owner, Terry was known for his kindness, intelligence and remarkable sense of humor.

He earned degrees from Kent State and Western Michigan University in geology and education. Terry was a former Sergeant in the US Army and proudly served in Vietnam.

Terry found joy in traveling, hiking, camping, rafting, sailing, visiting state capitals and spending time with family and friends. He was always eager to learn and explore. He was a proud member of the Men's Group at the First Congregational Church in South Haven and volunteered at the food pantry.

He is survived by his life partner of 25 years, Ann Meskauskas; his children Joseph Matthew Tatsch, Emily Grace (Meskauskas) Segerman, Elizabeth Anne Tatsch, Deanna Marie (Meskauskas) Marshall, Danielle Marie Tatsch, and David Andrew Tatsch; Grandchildren, Weston Marshall, Evelyn Marshall, Danzig Tatsch, Emerson Segerman, and Jenessee Tatsch-Otterbridge; His siblings Kenneth, Steve, Marc, Robin, and Lori Tatsch. He shared four of his children with his former spouse, Cynthia Howard.

He was preceded in death by his parents, William Tatsch and June (Sutcliffe) Tatsch and his brothers William and Richard Tatsch.

A celebration of life will be held in the summer. Terry will be deeply missed and lovingly remembered.

In lieu of the flowers, the family is asking for donations to be made to the First Congregational Church of South Haven.

To those who choose to leave a memory or condolence please visit www.starksfamilyfh.com.

Arrangements are entrusted to Filbrandt Chapel-Starks Family Funeral Homes and Cremation Services. 269-637-0333.

Mary Carlson

Jan. 5, 1953 – Nov. 27, 2025

With deep love and sorrow, we announce the passing of Mary Lyons Carlson, 72, beloved mother and friend, who left us peacefully on Thursday, Nov. 27, 2025.

Born on Jan. 5, 1953, Mary approached life with exceptional kindness and a warm heart, bringing beauty and light to everyone around her. An educator by trade and heart, she touched countless lives through her patience, compassion and insight.

In her later years, Mary faced dementia with quiet courage and grace. Though the illness changed parts of her journey, it never diminished the love she gave – or the love she received. Her family will forever remember the essence of who she was: gentle, thoughtful and endlessly caring.

Above all, Mary adored her family. She treasured time with her children and grandchildren, found joy in her artwork and loved the companionship of her dogs. These simple, meaningful moments were the heart of her life.

She is survived by her daughter Kate (Joshua) and son Zach (Erika); grandchildren Natalie, Lillian, Ethan, Ava; and siblings Joseph, Timothy, Robert and Jennifer.

She is preceded in death by her mother Nancy, father Robert and sister Melanie.

A visitation will be held from 5 to 7 p.m. on Friday, Dec. 5 at Filbrandt Chapel, 1076 S. Bailey Ave, South Haven, Michigan.

In lieu of flowers, the family encourages donations to Al-Van Humane Society or the Alzheimer's Association in her honor.

Mary's love, creativity, humor and gentle spirit will continue to live on in the hearts of all who knew her.

To those who choose to leave a memory or condolence go to www.starksfamilyfh.com.

Arrangements are entrusted to Filbrandt Chapel-Starks Family Funeral Homes and Cremation Services. 269-637-0333.

Daniel Way

Nov. 4, 1953 – Nov. 29, 2025

Daniel "Dan" Way, 72, of South Haven and the Saugatuck/Douglas, Mich. communities, passed away peacefully on the evening of Nov. 29, 2025, surrounded by his loving family.

Born Nov. 4, 1953, in Grand Rapids, Mich., Dan lived a full and energetic life marked by deep love for his family, hard work and genuine care for everyone he met.

Dan is survived by his devoted wife, Maribeth Way; his children Jennifer (Raul) Rodriguez, Ryan (Sarah) Way, and Rachael (Blair) Cotton; and ten wonderful grandchildren, as well as cherished nieces and a nephew. He is also survived by his siblings Michael, Kirk, Kendy, and Jinny, and by special friends Sherry Tedaldi and Tim Ottenwess.

Dan was preceded in death by his parents, Kenneth and Bonnie Way and his brother, John Way.

A successful and social real estate agent, Dan was well known and deeply respected in the South Haven and Saugatuck/Douglas communities, where his professionalism and enthusiasm helped countless clients find their place along the lakeshore. He served faithfully in his church and was generous with both his time and resources.

Dan had a gift for conversation and connection; he loved talking with people and was known for asking thoughtful questions that made others feel valued and special. Generous, ambitious, and hardworking, he poured his energy into his work, his community, and, above all, his family. His love for life was contagious and inspired those around him to dream bigger and reach new heights.

At home, Dan took great pride in his yard and gardens, always maintaining an immaculate home inside and out. He treasured time with his grandchildren and especially loved days spent at the beach with his family, where many of their favorite memories were made. Above all else, Dan's greatest joy was being with the people he loved.

A service celebrating Dan's life will be held at 11 a.m. with a visitation at 10 a.m. on Thursday, Dec. 11 and a luncheon to follow at Douglas Community Church.

In lieu of flowers, memorial contributions may be made to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in honor of Dan's generous heart and his care for children.

Road commissions shares what to expect from crews this winter

By TRIBUNE STAFF

LAWRENCE — From light dustings to major snowstorms, the Van Buren County Road Commission handles every winter weather event differently as crews work to maintain safe roads.

According to a news release, the road commission treats each winter snow event as an individual occurrence because every event is different and varies in snow depth, type (snow, slush, ice) and temperature changes.

Routine winter maintenance occurs within eight hour days, Monday through Friday.

Routine snow removal operations begin on the affected areas of the County Primary Road network as a first priority. These roads include Red Arrow Highway, Blue Star Highway, and all roads with the County Road designation.

These primary roads create a network of roads connecting to state highways, cities and villages and primarily have the most traffic.

"By focusing here, we can provide the greatest impact to the traveling public," the release stated. " Then, as a secondary priority, our crews work on the affected areas of the Local Road system (streets and avenues and within subdivisions)."

Non-routine winter maintenance occurs on weekends or overtime (hours beyond the normal eight-hour workday).

These operations are performed using minimum crew sizes to cover the affected areas including:

■ In the event of a snowfall in excess of four inches, the most critical locations on selected County Primary Roads will be covered, as conditions permit.

■ Unusual ice and/or wind conditions causing hazardous driving, or impassable conditions on the affected areas of the road system, as conditions permit.

■ In the event of a snowfall in excess of eight inches, authorization shall be extended to cover the Local Road system of the affected areas, as conditions permit.

"Our goal is to keep roads in a safe and reasonable condition for public travel within the limits of available resources," the release stated.

If you have questions on winter maintenance, contact the Van Buren County Road Commission at 269-674-8011, or email at vbcrc@vbcrc.org.

OVERTON

From page A1

said. "I ask myself at the end of now eight years, did I do a good job? I think that's for people to judge, but here's what I would say: I've been lucky on city council. I don't owe anyone anything, I'm independent. I have my own independent business and I can vote without any bias and I think that's really important for any elected official. ... I've stayed true to my ethics and my morality. I've never let that sway and I've always let that guide me. The last thing I want to say is, I wish nothing but the best for the new people coming in. I hope they can get a whole lot done and anything I can do to answer any questions and help. I just want the best for the city."

Contact: jnewell@southhaventribune.com, 269-637-1104

The South Haven Ice Rink opens at the end of November every year for people of all ages to enjoy.

Photos by Julie Newell / SH Tribune Editor

A series of upgrades are scheduled for next year at the Huron Street Pavilion, which is used as an ice rink in downtown South Haven.

ICE RINK

From page A1

electrical work," Brock said. "Originally, the only electrical work that was in the pavilion was, if you wanted to just do the holiday lights, but we know that we want to utilize that space if we ever wanted to have like food trucks, like maybe our touch a truck and have some food trucks there, or if the farm market needs to really plug into it as well. The beam that's in there had electrical upgrades to it, so now we're able to have that for festivals or for any special activities."

The electrical upgrades took place this year in the early summer and the chillers have been replaced for the ice rink.

The last part of the project will be the construction of the cooling system underground and flattening of the area.

Brock said the goal is for the project to be completed in time for the ice rink to open for next year's season. However, she said the projected timeline could change depending on who the contractors for the project will be.

"Knowing that we have a very short window to work with, because that pavilion area is used all year round," Brock said. "We're shooting for about mid-March when the construction will begin and (we) will begin the demo of the ice rink, taking the cement out and that initial stage piece of it. By mid-June, we've requested that no work, no construction being done and that we're able to utilize that space for our festivals and for parking and our farm market and all that."

Contact: jnewell@southhaventribune.com, 269-637-1104

Al-Van Humane Society
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Meet our Pet of the Week, Frosty Refrigerator!
Frosty Refrigerator is a three-year-old holiday heartthrob who showed up at our shelter thanks to a kind passerby who found him on the side of the road. This handsome, all-white gentleman is as social as they come and seems convinced that every person he meets is his next best friend. With his snowy coat and warm personality, Frosty is fully embracing the festive season and is more than ready to find a cozy home where he can celebrate all winter long. If you've been wishing for a little extra magic this year, Frosty Refrigerator might be the perfect gift for you.
Submit an adoption survey today at al-van.org/adopt.
Empty the Shelters
We are so excited to once again be participating in Empty The Shelters thanks to BISSELL Pet Foundation and Cathy Bissell. Adoption fees will be reduced for all our adult cats ($25) and dogs ($60). If you've been thinking about adopting, there's never been a better time to add some extra cheer to your home this holiday season.
Fur Ball 2026: Breakfast at Tiffany's
Tickets go on sale this week! Join us for a glamorous evening of elegance at Al-Van Humane Society's Fur Ball 2026: Breakfast at Tiffany's, on February 21, 2026! This spectacular evening will include dinner, cash bar, live and silent auctions, lively dueling pianos, and plenty of dancing.
Guests are encouraged to dress to impress in their finest evening wear or add a Breakfast at Tiffany's flair to their look. Whether you're bidding, dancing, or sipping something sparkling, every moment supports local animals in need.
Tickets go on sale on our website on December 5, 2025
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www.southhaventribune.net

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Wahmhoff Farms hosted the 21st annual Trees for Troops event to send Christmas trees to US military bases.

Wahmhoff Farms hosts 21st annual trees for troops event

By TRIBUNE STAFF

GOBLES — Wahmhoff Farms recently hosted the 21st annual Trees for Troops event where 638 Christmas trees were loaded and sent to US military bases.

According to a news release, 84 volunteers and 13 Wahmhoff workers were joined by soldiers, veterans and State Rep. Pauline Wendzel to help load the trees.

The Christmas trees were transported by FedEx for free and sent to military bases including:

- Hurlburt Field in Florida (Air Force)
- Ft. Rucker in Alabama (Army)
- Ft. Polk in Louisiana (Army)
- And Camp Lejeune in North Carolina (Marines)

Students from Gobles Elementary filled out and decorated the tags that were attached to the trees along with handmade Christmas ornaments for the trees.

Bangor School students also made Christmas cards to go with the trees.

Christmas tree growers who donated trees included:

- Armintrout's of Allegan
- Badger Evergreen of Allegan
- Circle B of Battle Creek
- Janke Tree Farms of Allegan
- Wahmhoff Farms

Both active and veteran soldiers joined in to help load Christmas trees for the Trees for Troops event in Gobles.

"Thank you to the soldiers that came out today and to our Veterans – some of whom have made it out here every year for 20 years to help us load trees for our troops," The release stated. "Thank you to our first responders who make it out here every year and thank you to each and every one of you for showing up in the cold and helping us load the trees going to our troops and their families."

97 volunteers and workers helped load 638 Christmas trees to be sent to US military bases as part of the annual Trees for Troops event.

Michigan data center development trails other Great Lakes states

By CAROL THOMPSON and SUMMER BALLENTINE
The Detroit News (TNS)

It might seem like they are cropping up everywhere, but Michigan is behind its neighboring Great Lakes states in developing data centers.

The development boom is much more dramatic in Illinois and Ohio, two states that account for half of all operational data facilities in the eight Great Lakes states and more than 60 percent of the data centers under development for the region, said João Ferreira, a regional economist for the University of Virginia's Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service.

Illinois and Ohio are the "largest and fastest-growing data center corridor in the region," Ferreira said. Illinois has 115 operational data centers. Ohio has 101. Michigan has 35, "a relatively small footprint" by comparison.

That could change since state lawmakers passed a sales and use tax exemption for data centers last year. Data centers are warehouses of computing equipment that host the equipment used to power the internet. As the burgeoning artificial intelligence industry expands, tech companies are racing to build huge data center facilities to support AI research and use.

Proposals to build data centers are now cropping up throughout Michigan. The most high-profile proposed data center, an estimated $7-plus billion project in Saline Township, is the topic of a Wednesday virtual public hearing.

The Michigan Public Service Commission is hosting the hearing to allow members of the public to weigh in on DTE Energy Co.'s proposal to serve the data center facility, which the utility company wants to fast-track instead of taking a slower, contested process that allows more parties to weigh in. More than 4,600 comments have already been submitted in the case.

At least eight active major data center projects are publicly known in the state. Save for the expansion of an existing data center in Gaines Township, the projects are not under construction yet. Most are still gathering the approvals they need from local governments and may not ultimately come to fruition.

"There are much more that are being proposed than will be built," Ferreira said. "They put the word out there, in terms of 'hey we want to create a data center,' and then they actually go and talk to two or three different counties. Depending upon their PR strategy, they might even try to put their name out there, that they want to invest in that county, but at the end of the day, there is a moment where they decide for one specific county, or one specific location."

While it seems like a lot of development at once, Phil Santer, COO of the economic development group Ann Arbor SPARK, said we shouldn't ask why data centers are racing to Michigan. Instead, he said we should ask why Michigan is behind.

"These aren't new; they just happen to be new to Michigan," he said. "But this is a pretty mature industry in most of the United States. Michigan is not a hot spot. We're not a hot spot yet, at all."

How Michigan, Great Lakes region rank

The Great Lakes region had about 525 operating data centers as of December 2024, Ferreira said, and about 220 more are planned for development through 2030.

Ferreira and his University of Virginia project team used S&P Global market data to count current data centers, data centers that will be developed through 2029 and the facilities' expected future energy needs. The S&P data is more detailed and accurate than other sources and avoids double-counting data center facilities that have multiple clients, he said.

The Great Lakes region is among the busiest for data center development in the United States, Ferreira said. About 20 percent of the country's data centers are in the Great Lakes states of Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York, he said. Another 20 percent are in Virginia, 18 percent are in Texas and the rest are distributed throughout the country.

Ferreira said data centers likely are attracted to the Great Lakes region because of its competitive electricity prices, relatively strong transmission networks, a cooler climate, and industrial land. Also, all of the Great Lakes states have tax incentives for data center development.

Other states offered those incentives before Michigan. In 2023, the Data Center Coalition, an industry group representing data center owners and operators, and the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce said Illinois' data center incentives had attracted $8.5 billion in investment there in four years.

Michigan's data center tax incentive was enacted last year. That's what kick-started the recent flurry of proposals, Ferreira said: "Michigan was one of the few states in the Great Lakes that didn't have a tax exemption for this big, large infrastructure, for data centers. But that changed. They are locating everywhere. They saw Michigan as a very attractive place, also."

The tax incentives have made Michigan a fast-growing data center market, said Dan Diorio, vice president of state policy for the Data Center Coalition, an industry group. He contended local communities are seeking to attract data centers.

"This year, the state unlocked substantial investment with the passage of legislation establishing a new data center tax and economic development program, similar to programs offered in more than 35 other states," he said. "The data center industry is now investing billions of dollars in Michigan, and the state is quickly becoming a growing data center market."

SH awarded grant for road reconstruction

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — The Michigan Department of Transportation recently awarded 11 Transportation Economic Development Fund Category F grants totaling $3.9 million to help rebuild local roads across the state.

According to a news release, one of the grants was awarded to the City of South Haven to rebuild Kalamazoo Street from the city limit north approximately 1,138 feet.

"TEDF grants are a great tool for communities to improve local roads while helping create jobs and economic opportunities," State Transportation Director Bradley C. Wieferich said in the release. "These 11 agencies will be able to resurface roads, improve intersections and address overall safety in areas where there are high commercial, customer and employee traffic."

Kalamazoo Street is the entrance to an industrial zone, which is home to several metal and plastic manufacturers, auto repair and supply shops and a steel fabricator. The road is not currently built to all-season standards but this project will add it to the all-season system network.

The total project cost is $610,740, with 61 percent (up to $375,000) in TEDF Category F funds and $235,740 in matching funds from the City of South Haven.

"South Haven supports a diverse industrial base that includes advanced materials production, precision manufacturing and logistics networks," South Haven City Manager Kate Hosier said in the release. "With support from the TEDF Category F grant, the Kalamazoo Street reconstruction will strengthen all-season access to an important industrial corridor, enhancing reliability for commercial traffic and reinforcing South Haven's role in Michigan's manufacturing economy."

Other grant award winners include:

- Houghton County Road Commission: Erickson Drive.
- City of Sault Ste Marie: Meridian Street.
- City of Hudsonville: Balsam Drive.
- City of Mt. Pleasant: Bradley Street.
- City of Port Huron: 24th Street.
- City of Battle Creek: Union Street.
- City of Coldwater: Industrial Avenue/S. Clay Street/Division Street (Old US-27).
- Ingham County Road Department: Farm Lane and Forest Road.
- City of Hillsdale: Industrial Drive.
- Eaton County Road Commission: Billwood Highway.

Enacted in 1987 and reauthorized in 1993, the TEDF helps finance highway, road and street projects that are critical to the movement of people and products, getting workers to their jobs, materials to growers and manufacturers and finished goods to consumers.

TEDF "Category F" or "Urban Areas in Rural Counties" grants provide state funding for public roadway improvements that create system continuity with the secondary all-season road system. Eligible entities for the Category F program are urban areas of 5,000 population or more in rural counties having less than 400,000 population.

More information about the program is available online at www.Michigan.gov/TEDF.

Surf Internet expands fiber network in Hartford

By TRIBUNE STAFF

HARTFORD — Surf Internet recently announced that construction of its fiber-optic network in Hartford is nearing completion.

According to a news release, the project already has service available to the first group of homes and businesses.

"We welcome Surf Internet to Hartford to bring more options and opportunities to our residents!" Hartford Mayor Rick Hall said in the release.

The project, which has three phases of construction, will bring fiber internet to 1,000 locations across the city by the end of December.

The first area came online at the end of October, giving 250 homes and businesses access to fiber service. A second area covering 300 additional locations was scheduled for completion by the end of November.

"The third and final area, reaching more than 400 locations, will be finished in December," the release stated. "Surf brought in extra construction crews to help accelerate the timeline and ensure steady progress throughout the fall."

Surf Internet CEO Gene Crusie said in the release that the project reflects both the city's momentum and Surf's broader mission to expand fiber connectivity across the Great Lakes region.

"We're thrilled to see fiber service going live in Hartford and to give residents and businesses the kind of internet access that helps communities grow," Crusie said in the release. "Whether it's supporting local employers, helping students stay connected, or strengthening the quality of life for families, reliable internet matters. We look forward to being a long-term partner in Hartford's future."

Residents and businesses can check address availability and sign up at surfinternet.com.

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A medley of tech gifts for everyone on your shopping list

By SHAWN CHEN
AP Technology Writer

NEW YORK — It's the most wonderful time of the year, unless you want to find the perfect gifts for tech lovers.

There's a lot of slop to sift through as we get closer to the holidays, many interests to appeal to and a whole bunch of deals-that-aren't-deals flashing before our screens. So here's a guide – and some sales – to help you get started on your gift shopping journey.

George Walker IV / AP

A Nintendo Switch 2 display appears at a Best Buy in Nashville, Tenn., on June 5.

For your gamers

The Nintendo Switch 2 was the biggest and most anticipated console launch of 2025, and if history is any indication, it will be increasingly harder to find as Christmas approaches. But for the gamers in your life – both young and adult – this is the gift to get.

Nintendo's Black Friday deals for the console and games have been announced but the best bang for your buck may be the console bundles. The Switch 2 is still available as just the console only for $449 or bundled with Mario Kart World for $499. A new $499 bundle is now available where the console is packaged with Pokémon Legends: Z-A. Games retail for about $70 a piece, so you do save a little with bundles.

Godofredo A. Vásquez / AP

An iPhone 17 is displayed at Apple Park in Cupertino, Calif., on Sept. 9.

Seth Wenig / AP

A Galaxy Z Fold 7 is displayed during a Samsung preview event in New York on July 7.

Need a new iPhone?

The iPhone Air and iPhone 17 Pro Max captured the headlines this year when the new lineup launched, but the base iPhone 17 received an upgraded camera (telephoto lens), more base storage and a longer battery life. Given the price for this model hasn't changed, you're straight up getting more tech for the same price. If your gift recipient's current iPhone is a few generations behind, this is a good time to consider an upgrade.

What about AI? The iPhone 17 doesn't make as many leaps into the technology as its predecessor, but the new iOS and processer prepares the phone for any advancements that may come in 2026. The iPhone 17 retails at $800.

Or maybe you'd like a foldable phone?

If you or someone in your life has ever been curious about a foldable phone, consider Samsung's newest Galaxy Z Fold 7 model. This phone solves many of the issues users have been concerned about since fold phones hit the market: It's much thinner and lighter than its predecessors – 0.17 inches thick when unfolded and less than half an inch folded – and it weighs slightly less than half a pound, impressive considering they boosted the size of all the screens.

But the price of a fold phone remains steep compared to the flagship iPhone and Galaxy devices. The Z Fold 7 currently is running a sale on its site but normally retails starting at $1,999.

Planning to shoot more video or pictures?

For anyone interested in doing more filming or photography with their mobile device, this supremely portable tripod by SelfieShow offers solid stability even when extended to its max height of 71 inches. The mounting arm also offers a wide array of positioning for shooters on the go. And the rig can collapse into a retractable selfie stick for even more functionality and portability.

This portable tripod retails for $19.99.

Recording clearer audio

For aspiring influencers, podcasters or vloggers in your life, try these wireless microphones by Hollyland. The Lark M2 Wireless Microphone mics are easy to use, have good range and do well in filtering out background noise. You can easily attach these to clothes for interviews or even hold them for the tiny mic lifestyle. Best of all, it comes with two mics per order.

These mics are currently on sale for $76.

There's always someone who wants a TV

For those TV lovers who just want a little more for their gaming or cinematic experience, consider Samsung's S90F OLED TV. This higher-end TV offers excellent contrast, colors and Ethernet performance. It also can act as a giant monitor if you want to plug your PC/gaming console into it, offering VRR support up to 144Hz on all four of its HDMI ports. For those who like to add sound systems or other peripherals to their TV, it also offers an additional three USB-A ports and one USB-C port.

Normally this TV retails around $1,800, but an ongoing holiday promo (until Dec. 1) puts it, at 55 inches, at $1,199.99.

Typing on the go

Portability is core to the Logitech Pebble 2 wireless keyboard and mouse combo. This minimalist and highly functional offering by Logitech will satisfy on-the-go users who are looking for a silent, but still tactile, Bluetooth mouse and keyboard. It also offers a one-tap, multi-device switching option if you've already paired it with said devices – which include Android tablets and Apple iPads in addition to laptops – a great feature if you're multitasking.

The combo comes in several colors and retails for $49.99. If you're OK with black, Walmart has a deal for $42.

A jar of local flavors can spark memories and add a personal touch to gift-giving

By KATIE WORKMAN
Associated Press

A gift doesn't have to be big or pricy to feel thoughtful. Instead of the usual bottle of wine, give something that makes your recipient feel truly seen: a little edible treasure that nods to their hometown, heritage or favorite trip from years ago.

It's a deliciously personal way to say "I know you."

Regional condiments are like souvenirs, celebrating local flavors. A jar of barbecue sauce, a bottle of hot sauce or a regional mayo can tell a story and capture the essence of a place. Here's a handful of beloved sauces, spreads, jams and more that make tasty and personal small gifts.

The condiments generally hover around the $10 to $15 mark, making them an economical pick.

Hot sauces and BBQ staples

Adoboloco hot sauces, from Hawaii's island of Maui, carry a tropical punch with bold island chiles, perfect for grilled fish or roasted veggies. The ingredient lists are short and the peppers are grown in Hawaii itself.

In the South, **Big Bob Gibson's barbecue sauces**, from Decatur, Alabama, are known for their smoky, tangy flavor, with the Original White Sauce a mainstay (especially on smoked chicken).

Pitmasters at **Franklin Barbecue**, in Austin, Texas, offer sauces and rubs that are rich, bold and unmistakably Texan.

Also hailing from Austin are **Yellowbird** hot sauces – the organic habanero and serrano hot sauces and the Classic Blue Agave Sriracha are particularly beloved.

For a taste of South America, **Tari** hot sauces from Peru showcase native peppers, such as aji amarillo and rocoto, both grown in the Andes. The ingredients are ground on a traditional batan (a stone mortar), creating sauces with a bright and fruity (not scorching) heat that elevates dishes from grilled meats to vegetables.

Specialty condiments

Duke's Mayo is a century-old Southern classic, now based in Mauldin, South Carolina. It uses just the yolks of eggs (no whites) for extra richness, and has two kinds of vinegar for extra zing. The mayonnaise adds tang and creaminess to sandwiches, potato salads and more. (Some fans have even gotten mayo tattoos promoted by Duke's – that's brand loyalty.) Duke's is generally available nationwide, but isn't as much of a household name as Hellman's and Kraft outside the South.

The rich texture and subtle umami punch of the Japanese **Kewpie mayo** have inspired a global following. It also uses just the yolks of the eggs, and also includes rice vinegar and a dash of MSG. Put it on sushi or okonomiyaki, or use it as a base for dressings.

Handmade small-batch condiments like **Auntie Rana's**, made in New York's Hudson Valley and in Maine, and inspired by South and Southeast Asian flavors, can bring a family-rooted touch to meals. Think Naga garlic mayo, mango achaar and smoked chili oil.

Jams and preserves

For fruit lovers, **American Spoon**, in Petoskey, Michigan, delivers artisanal preserves and sauces perfect for toast, charcuterie boards or baking gifts. Michigan cherry fans might swoon over a jar of their famous sour cherry preserves, and their Red Haven peach preserves feature hand-peeled peaches grown specifically for American Spoon.

Marmalade Grove makes beloved citrus marmalades in Ojai, California. Handpicked pixie tangerines, Cara Cara oranges infused with hibiscus, Meyer lemons and honey – each flavor captures the sunny citrus of the area.

From San Francisco, **We Love Jam** offers seasonal, small-batch jams such as their popular Blenheim apricot jam, made from one of the last remaining orchards of these endangered apricots.

Katie Workman writes regularly about food for The Associated Press. She has written two cookbooks focused on family-friendly cooking, "Dinner Solved!" and "The Mom 100 Cookbook." She blogs at https://themom100.com/. She can be reached at Katie@themom100.com.

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PUBLIC NOTICE
The South Haven Township Board of Review will meet on: Tuesday, December 9, 2025, at 11am at the Township Hall 09761 Blue Star Hwy South Haven, Michigan. The purpose of this meeting is to correct qualified errors. NO VALUATION APPEALS CAN BE HEARD. The July and December Boards of Review have different authorities than the March Board of Review. The July and December Boards of Review meet to correct Qualified Errors, and to consider appeals related to the Principal Residence Exemption, Qualified Agricultural Exemption, Taxable Value Uncapping, the Qualified Start-up Business Exemption, and Poverty Exemptions.
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Mailing Address:
09761 Blue Star Hwy
South Haven, MI 49090

CITY OF SOUTH HAVEN PUBLIC HEARING NOTICE ZONING BOARD OF APPEALS
On Monday, December 22, 2025, the Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) for the City of South Haven will hear public comments related to the request(s) below. The public hearing(s) will be held at 7:00 PM at City Hall, 539 Phoenix St, South Haven, concerning the following:
1. 224 Erie Street – Nonuse/Dimensional Variance
Scott James has applied for a dimensional variance seeking relief from Zoning Ordinance Sections 403.01 and 2302(4) to construct second story additions at the front and rear of the existing home. The request is to permit a vertical addition with a 3 ft side yard setback. The parcel number for the referenced address is 80-53-024-003-00.
2. 111 Woodman Street – Nonuse/Dimensional Variance
Thomas Murray has applied for a nonuse variance seeking relief from Zoning Ordinance Section 2203.06 regarding the parking requirements for short-term rentals in a detached single-family dwelling. The parcel number for the referenced address is 80-53-720-010-50.
Supporting documentation is available for review at the Building Services office, 539 Phoenix Street, South Haven, MI 49090 during normal business hours. Written comments may be submitted in lieu of or in addition to a personal appearance. Written comments must be received no later than 12 p.m. (noon) on Monday, December 22, 2025. Written comments should be addressed to the ZBA and must be submitted to the Zoning Administrator at kdissette@southhavenmi.gov or via postal mail addressed to the ZBA and sent to 539 Phoenix Street, South Haven, MI 49090.
Individuals requesting reasonable accommodation for impairments or disabilities should contact the City Clerk no later than five days prior to the public hearing in person at City Hall, at 269-637-0750, or at mkiker@southhavenmi.gov.
Kelly Getman-Dissette, Zoning Administrator
(269) 637-0760 kdissette@southhavenmi.gov

PUBLIC/LEGAL NOTICES

To place a public notice, please send your requests to **legals@pmginmi.com.**

Please allow 48 hours to process, larger legals may need at least four business days.

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LizRyan Salon opens new location in South Haven

Photos provided
South Haven Area Chamber of Commerce celebrated the opening of LizRyan Salon and Spa's new location in downtown South Haven

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — LizRyan Salon and Spa recently opened the doors of their brand-new, fully renovated location at 253 Center Street, Suite 103, in the heart of downtown South Haven.

According to a news release, the new salon offers an elevated and welcoming environment for guests to enjoy their full-service beauty and wellness experience.

"Established in 2018, LizRyan Salon and Spa was born when owner Amanda purchased the business after overcoming her battle with cancer," the release stated. "Rooted in the belief that life is too short not to chase your dreams, LizRyan has grown into a thriving, community-centered salon built on resilience, empowerment and connection."

Today, the women-owned salon – powered by an all-women team – offers full-service hair, skin and nail care in a space designed with comfort, quality and warmth in mind.

LizRyan Salon and Spa provides a wide range of services including haircuts and color, manicures, pedicures, professional massage, skincare treatments and eyelash services.

The salon emphasizes the use of high-quality, clean and environmentally conscious brands, featuring shampoos, conditioners and styling products from Surface and Matrix, both known for cruelty-free, sulfate-free, botanically based formulas ideal for a variety of hair types.

"Their talented team of stylists, massage therapists, estheticians and support staff work together to create a full-service salon and spa experience where every guest feels cared for," the release stated.

For more information or book your appointment, go to www.lizryansalon.com or call 269-615-0366.

LizRyan Salon & Spa provides a wide range of services including haircuts, manicures, pedicures, professional massage, skincare treatments and eyelash services.

Michigan tops doula goal in push to improve maternal and infant health

By JANELLE D. JAMES
Bridge Michigan

Michigan is rapidly expanding doula access after beginning to cover the service through its federally funded Medicaid program, a shift that health officials say will improve birth outcomes and strengthen maternal care.

There are over 1,000 registered doulas in Michigan, which surpassed the state's goal of having 500 registered doulas by 2028, as part of the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services' Advancing Healthy Births Plan.

The plan aims to eliminate health disparities and expand access to doula services, which includes the creation of a statewide doula registry to help individuals find a provider near them.

Doulas are professionals who provide physical, mental and spiritual support to pregnant mothers before, during and after birth.

"We wanted to make sure that people who needed doulas feel safe with the doulas that they found and that they felt represented within their doula community," said Erika Millender, a doula and a member of the Michigan Doula Advisory Council, which works with the state as part of its doula initiative.

"We wanted to open up the organizations that provided doula training. There's a doula for everyone but not every doula is for every person," she added.

Of the roughly 1,000 doulas statewide, over 700 are enrolled as Medicaid providers, which "ensures every Michigan county has access to at least one doula who serves Medicaid-eligible families," according to MDHHS.

The state started covering doula services through Medicaid in 2023 and expanded coverage last year to include 12 visits during pregnancy, increased the rate for labor and delivery support to $1,500 and the reimbursement rate for a visit to $100.

In recent years, more women have become interested in midwife and doula services because of the disparities associated with hospital births.

Women who have a doula are 47 percent less likely to have a cesarean delivery and a 29 percent lower chance of having a preterm delivery, according to a study published in the National Library of Medicine.

"Doulas are absolutely vital to improving birth outcomes. We provide emotional, educational and physical support, but we also advocate for families, making sure their voices are heard and their choices are respected," Millender said.

The problem is especially severe for Black women, who face a pregnancy-related death rate more than three times higher than that of white women.

More than 80 percent of pregnancy-related deaths, whether they occur during labor or within the year after it, are preventable, according to the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention. Social factors like income, access to high-quality care and the ability to manage health conditions can play an important role in maternal health.

"When we intentionally focus on improving outcomes of Black and Indigenous families who have disproportionately higher rates of perinatal mortality and morbidity, we create a wave of safety and dignity that genuinely improves the experience for everyone," Millender said.

State health leaders say the wider reach of doula care may help push Michigan's infant mortality rate below the current 6.1 deaths per 1,000 live births. Although that's the lowest it's ever been, it's still above the national average of 5.5 deaths per 1,000 live births.

"Michigan's investment in doulas is transforming maternal health outcomes across the state," said Elizabeth Hertel, MDHHS director, in a press statement. "When families have access to trusted birth support, we see healthier parents, healthier babies and stronger communities."

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SOUTH HAVEN COMMUNITY CALENDAR

Ongoing events

Visually impaired and blind persons support group meeting: Every third Wednesday of the month at 1 p.m. at Senior Services of Van Buren County.

Dementia and Alzheimer's caregivers support group meeting: Every third Wednesday of each month at 6 p.m. at Peace Evangelical Lutheran Church library.

Three Blondes Brewing: Trivia night on Thursdays at 7 p.m. and 8 p.m. and Sundays at 1 p.m. and 2 p.m.

Sparkle and Spice Boutique: Mom and Me play date. Fridays from 9-10 a.m.

South Haven Center for the Arts: Center Studio for adults from 6-8 p.m. on the first and third Wednesday of the month. Artists of any level can bring their own projects to work on. Basic art supplies will be available. Attendees must be 18 years old and over. Members are free, non-members cost $5.

South Haven Center for the Arts: Center Studio for ages 9 to 13 from 4-5:30 p.m. every Wednesday. Young artists are invited to create art at their own pace with an instructor to help guide as needed. Free workshop but a $10 donation is suggested to help cover cost of supplies.

Candlelight Yoga: Thursdays at 7:30 p.m. at the Church of Epiphany. Cost is $15.

Food pantry: First Congregational Church open from 10 a.m. to noon on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. It is a drive-up food pantry.

Food pantry: Sacred Heart Catholic Church. For Bangor residents only. Open from 1-4 p.m. on Thursdays.

Food, clothing, baby pantry: Lily of the Valley Church in Covert. Open from noon to 2 p.m. on Wednesdays. Must call the central office to register.

Personal care and clothing pantry: First Assembly of God open from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Wednesdays. Must call the central office to register.

Baby pantry: Peace Lutheran Church open from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday. Must call the central office to register.

Baby pantry: Simpson United Methodist Church in Bangor. Open from 10 a.m. to noon on Tuesdays. Must call the central office to register.

South Haven Memorial Library: Story Time on 11 a.m. to noon on Tuesdays through May 26, 2026.

HawksHead: Pasta on the Patio every Wednesday at 5 p.m.

Michigan Maritime Museum: Hands-on the Harbor every Thursday at 10:30 a.m.

Liberty Hyde Bailey Museum: "The Story of Snow" by Mark Cassino and John Nelson Ph.D. Storywalk. The museum is now closed but appointments can be scheduled by calling the museum.

Lakeside Social Bowling Alley: Glow Bowl every Friday from noon to 9 p.m.

Bridge: Chicago Scoring – 1 pm Tuesdays. Lakeside Social, 9921 Blue Star Memorial Highway, South Haven.

Bridge: Duplicate Scoring – 1 pm Wednesdays. Lakeside Social, 9921 Blue Star Memorial Highway, South Haven.

Michigan Maritime Museum: free admission on the first Sunday of every month from November through April.

First United Methodist Church: Free meals every Tuesday night. Doors open at 5:30 p.m. Meal is served at 6 p.m.

Lake Michigan College South Haven Campus: Technology Help Workshops from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. every Thursday through Dec. 11.

Julie Newell / Tribune Editor

Snow falls Wednesday night at Dyckman Park downtown South Haven.

December

7 – Paw Paw Community Chorus: 25th Annual Christmas Concert at 4 p.m. at Paw Paw United Methodist Church.

8 – South Haven Garden Club: Club Christmas party at First Congregational Church.

8 – South Haven Area Water Sewer Authority: Water and sewer rates and fees informational meeting from 5 to 7 p.m. at South Haven High School integrated learning center, 600 Elkenburg St.

10 – Liberty Hyde Bailey Museum: For the Birds! Bird feeder ornament decoration from 4 to 6 p.m.

10 – South Haven Center for the Art: Mistletoe Market from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.

10 – South Haven Memorial Library: Hooked on Yarn from 1 to 3:30 p.m.

11 – South Haven Center for the Art: Mistletoe Market from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.

11 – First United Methodist Church: Free meal. Doors open at 5:30 p.m. and the meal is served at 6 p.m.

12 – South Haven Center for the Art: Mistletoe Market from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.

12 – South Haven Memorial Library: South Haven Writers Christmas Story read-around from 1 to 4 p.m. Open to the public.

12-13 – Christmas in the Village: Paw Paw holiday events including the Lighted Holiday Parade, tree lighting ceremony, Rotary 5K Santa Run and pictures with Santa.

13 – South Haven Center for the Art: Mistletoe Market from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.

13 – Rotary Club: Rotary and Salvation Army Bell Ringing at Flying Saucer and Walmart.

14 – South Haven Center for the Art: Mistletoe Market from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.

15 – Covert Branch Library: After school art workshop for grades 6 to 12 from 3 to 5 p.m.

17 – Michigan Maritime Museum: Holiday Twilight Concert featuring the Kal-Haven Strings from 6:30 to 7:30 p.m. Free concert with a $5 donation or a non-perishable food item.

18 – First United Methodist Church: Free meal. Doors open at 5:30 p.m. and the meal is served at 6 p.m.

19 – South Haven Memorial Library: Messy Play for preschoolers from 11 a.m. to noon.

20 – South Haven Memorial Library: Free STEM activities event from 11 a.m. to noon.

20 – Michigan Maritime Museum: Selfies with Santa from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

20 – Michigan Maritime Museum: Cookies and Cocoa with Captain Bob from noon to 1 p.m.

21 – South Haven Performance Series: Choral ensemble Vox GR to perform at 4 p.m. at Peace Evangelical Lutheran Church.

22 – Covert Branch Library: After school art workshop for grades 6 to 12 from 3 to 5 p.m.

29 – Covert Branch Library: After school art workshop for grades 6 to 12 from 3 to 5 p.m.

31 – New Years Eve Celebration: Downtown South Haven.

January

2 – South Haven Memorial Library: Play-doh play date at 11 a.m.

5 – Covert Branch Library: After school art workshop for grades 6 to 12 from 3 to 5 p.m.

16 – South Haven Memorial Library: Messy Play for preschoolers from 11 a.m. to noon.

19 – Covert Branch Library: After school art workshop for grades 6 to 12 from 3 to 5 p.m.

24 – South Haven Memorial Library: Astronomy Club fro kids starting at 11 a.m.

26 – Covert Branch Library: After school art workshop for grades 6 to 12 from 3 to 5 p.m.

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FOCUS

Writing builds resilience by changing your brain, helping you face everyday challenges

By EMILY RONAY JOHNSTON
University of California, Merced
(The Conversation)

Ordinary and universal, the act of writing changes the brain. From dashing off a heated text message to composing an op-ed, writing allows you to, at once, name your pain and create distance from it. Writing can shift your mental state from overwhelm and despair to grounded clarity – a shift that reflects resilience.

Psychology, the media and the wellness industry shape public perceptions of resilience: Social scientists study it, journalists celebrate it, and wellness brands sell it.

They all tell a similar story: Resilience is an individual quality that people can strengthen with effort. The American Psychological Association defines resilience as an ongoing process of personal growth through life's challenges. News headlines routinely praise individuals who refuse to give up or find silver linings in times of hardship. The wellness industry promotes relentless self-improvement as the path to resilience.

In my work as a professor of writing studies, I research how people use writing to navigate trauma and practice resilience. I have witnessed thousands of students turn to the written word to work through emotions and find a sense of belonging. Their writing habits suggest that writing fosters resilience. Insights from psychology and neuroscience can help explain how.

Writing rewires the brain

In the 1980s, psychologist James Pennebaker developed a therapeutic technique called expressive writing to help patients process trauma and psychological challenges. With this technique, continuously journaling about something painful helps create mental distance from the experience and eases its cognitive load.

In other words, externalizing emotional distress through writing fosters safety. Expressive writing turns pain into a metaphorical book on a shelf, ready to be reopened with intention. It signals the brain, "You don't need to carry this anymore."

Translating emotions and thoughts into words on paper is a complex mental task. It involves retrieving memories and planning what to do with them, engaging brain areas associated with memory and decision-making. It also involves putting those memories into language, activating the brain's visual and motor systems.

Writing things down supports memory consolidation – the brain's conversion of short-term memories into long-term ones. The process of integration makes it possible for people to reframe painful experiences and manage their emotions. In essence, writing can help free the mind to be in the here and now.

Taking action through writing

The state of presence that writing can elicit is not just an abstract feeling; it reflects complex activity in the nervous system.

Brain imaging studies show that putting feelings into words helps regulate emotions. Labeling emotions – whether through expletives and emojis or carefully chosen words – has multiple benefits. It calms the amygdala, a cluster of neurons that detects threat and triggers the fear response: fight, flight, freeze or fawn. It also engages the prefrontal cortex, a part of the brain that supports goal-setting and problem-solving.

In other words, the simple act of naming your emotions can help you shift from reaction to response. Instead of identifying with your feelings and mistaking them for facts, writing can help you simply become aware of what's arising and prepare for deliberate action.

Even mundane writing tasks like making a to-do list stimulate parts of the brain involved in reasoning and decision-making, helping you regain focus.

Making meaning through writing

Choosing to write is also choosing to make meaning. Studies suggest that having a sense of agency is both a prerequisite for, and an outcome of, writing.

Researchers have long documented how writing is a cognitive activity – one that people use to communicate, yes, but also to understand the human experience. As many in the field of writing studies recognize, writing is a form of thinking – a practice that people never stop learning. With that, writing has the potential to continually reshape the mind. Writing not only expresses but actively creates identity.

Writing also regulates your psychological state. And the words you write are themselves proof of regulation – the evidence of resilience.

Popular coverage of human resilience often presents it as extraordinary endurance. News coverage of natural disasters implies that the more severe the trauma, the greater the personal growth. Pop psychology often equates resilience with unwavering optimism. Such representations can obscure ordinary forms of adaptation. Strategies people already use to cope with everyday life – from rage-texting to drafting a resignation letter – signify transformation.

Building resilience through writing

These research-backed tips can help you develop a writing practice conducive to resilience:

1. Write by hand whenever possible. In contrast to typing or tapping on a device, handwriting requires greater cognitive coordination. It slows your thinking, allowing you to process information, form connections and make meaning.

2. Write daily. Start small and make it regular. Even jotting brief notes about your day – what happened, what you're feeling, what you're planning or intending – can help you get thoughts out of your head and ease rumination.

3. Write before reacting. When strong feelings surge, write them down first. Keep a notebook within reach and make it a habit to write it before you say it. Doing so can support reflective thinking, helping you act with purpose and clarity.

4. Write a letter you never send. Don't just write down your feelings – address them to the person or situation that's troubling you. Even writing a letter to yourself can provide a safe space for release without the pressure of someone else's reaction.

5. Treat writing as a process. Any time you draft something and ask for feedback on it, you practice stepping back to consider alternative perspectives. Applying that feedback through revision can strengthen self-awareness and build confidence.

Resilience may be as ordinary as the journal entries people scribble, the emails they exchange, the task lists they create – even the essays students pound out for professors.

The act of writing is adaptation in progress.

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THE CONVERSATION

More than half of new articles on the internet are being written by AI – is human writing headed for extinction?

By FRANCESCO AGNELLINI
Binghamton University, State University of New York (The Conversation)

The line between human and machine authorship is blurring, particularly as it's become increasingly difficult to tell whether something was written by a person or AI.

Now, in what may seem like a tipping point, the digital marketing firm Graphite recently published a study showing that more than 50 percent of articles on the web are being generated by artificial intelligence.

As a scholar who explores how AI is built, how people are using it in their everyday lives, and how it's affecting culture, I've thought a lot about what this technology can do and where it falls short.

If you're more likely to read something written by AI than by a human on the internet, is it only a matter of time before human writing becomes obsolete? Or is this simply another technological development that humans will adapt to?

It isn't all or nothing

Thinking about these questions reminded me of Umberto Eco's essay "Apocalyptic and Integrated," which was originally written in the early 1960s. Parts of it were later included in an anthology titled "Apocalypse Postponed," which I first read as a college student in Italy.

In it, Eco draws a contrast between two attitudes toward mass media. There are the "apocalyptics" who fear cultural degradation and moral collapse. Then there are the "integrated" who champion new media technologies as a democratizing force for culture.

Back then, Eco was writing about the proliferation of TV and radio. Today, you'll often see similar reactions to AI.

Yet Eco argued that both positions were too extreme. It isn't helpful, he wrote, to see new media as either a dire threat or a miracle. Instead, he urged readers to look at how people and communities use these new tools, what risks and opportunities they create, and how they shape – and sometimes reinforce – power structures.

While I was teaching a course on deepfakes during the 2024 election, Eco's lesson also came back to me. Those were days when some scholars and media outlets were regularly warning of an imminent "deepfake apocalypse."

Would deepfakes be used to mimic major political figures and push targeted disinformation? What if, on the eve of an election, generative AI was used to mimic the voice of a candidate on a robocall telling voters to stay home?

Those fears weren't groundless: Research shows that people aren't especially good at identifying deepfakes. At the same time, they consistently overestimate their ability to do so.

In the end, though, the apocalypse was postponed. Post-election analyses found that deepfakes did seem to intensify some ongoing political trends, such as the erosion of trust and polarization, but there's no evidence that they affected the final outcome of the election.

Listicles, news updates and how-to guides

Of course, the fears that AI raises for supporters of democracy are not the same as those it creates for writers and artists.

For them, the core concerns are about authorship: How can one person compete with a system trained on millions of voices that can produce text at hyper-speed? And if this becomes the norm, what will it do to creative work, both as an occupation and as a source of meaning?

It's important to clarify what's meant by "online content," the phrase used in the Graphite study, which analyzed over 65,000 randomly selected articles of at least 100 words on the web. These can include anything from peer-reviewed research to promotional copy for miracle supplements.

A closer reading of the Graphite study shows that the AI-generated articles consist largely of general-interest writing: news updates, how-to guides, lifestyle posts, reviews and product explainers.

The primary economic purpose of this content is to persuade or inform, not to express originality or creativity. Put differently, AI appears to be most useful when the writing in question is low-stakes and formulaic: the weekend-in-Rome listicle, the standard cover letter, the text produced to market a business.

A whole industry of writers – mostly freelance, including many translators – has relied on precisely this kind of work, producing blog posts, how-to material, search engine optimization text and social media copy. The rapid adoption of large language models has already displaced many of the gigs that once sustained them.

Collaborating with AI

The dramatic loss of this work points toward another issue raised by the Graphite study: the question of authenticity, not only in identifying who or what produced a text, but also in understanding the value that humans attach to creative activity.

How can you distinguish a human-written article from a machine-generated one? And does that ability even matter?

Over time, that distinction is likely to grow less significant, particularly as more writing emerges from interactions between humans and AI. A writer might draft a few lines, let an AI expand them and then reshape that output into the final text.

This article is no exception. As a non-native English speaker, I often rely on AI to refine my language before sending drafts to an editor. At times the system attempts to reshape what I mean. But once its stylistic tendencies become familiar, it becomes possible to avoid them and maintain a personal tone.

Also, artificial intelligence is not entirely artificial, since it is trained on human-made material. It's worth noting that even before AI, human writing has never been entirely human, either. Every technology, from parchment and stylus paper to the typewriter and now AI, has shaped how people write and how readers make sense of it.

Another important point: AI models are increasingly trained on datasets that include not only human writing but also AI-generated and human–AI co-produced text.

This has raised concerns about their ability to continue improving over time. Some commentators have already described a sense of disillusionment following the release of newer large models, with companies struggling to deliver on their promises.

Human voices may matter even more

But what happens when people become overly reliant on AI in their writing?

Some studies show that writers may feel more creative when they use artificial intelligence for brainstorming, yet the range of ideas often becomes narrower. This uniformity affects style as well: These systems tend to pull users toward similar patterns of wording, which reduces the differences that usually mark an individual voice. Researchers also note a shift toward Western – and especially English-speaking – norms in the writing of people from other cultures, raising concerns about a new form of AI colonialism.

In this context, texts that display originality, voice and stylistic intention are likely to become even more meaningful within the media landscape, and they may play a crucial role in training the next generations of models.

If you set aside the more apocalyptic scenarios and assume that AI will continue to advance – perhaps at a slower pace than in the recent past – it's quite possible that thoughtful, original, human-generated writing will become even more valuable.

Put another way: The work of writers, journalists and intellectuals will not become superfluous simply because much of the web is no longer written by humans.

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FOCUS

The rise of the autistic detective – why neurodivergent minds are at the heart of modern mysteries

By SOOHYUN CHO
Assistant Professor at the Center for Integrative Studies in the Arts & Humanities, Michigan State University (The Conversation)

There never seems to be a shortage of good crime shows on TV, and network television is teeming with detectives who think – and act – differently.

This fall, new seasons of "Elsbeth," "High Potential," "Patience" and "Watson" have aired, and they all feature leads who share similar characteristics: They're outsiders, they're socially awkward, they can be emotionally distant, and their minds operate in unconventional ways.

In fact, they all possess traits that align with what many people now associate with neurodivergence – what scholar Nick Walker defines as "a mind that functions in ways that diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of 'normal.'"

As a scholar of popular culture, I've long been fascinated by this recurring character type – detectives who might, today, be diagnosed as having autism spectrum disorder.

While researching my forthcoming book, "The Autistic Detective," I've come to realize that most detectives in popular culture – yes, even Sherlock Holmes – exhibited neurodivergent characteristics, long before the term existed.

The thin line between genius and madness

In the late 19th century, when Sherlock Holmes was created, there was widespread scientific interest in the workings of the mind, particularly the thin line between genius and madness.

British psychologist James Sullydescribed "men of genius" as exhibiting "intellectual or moral peculiarities which are distinctly symptomatic of mental disease," naming Edgar Allan Poe as an example of the "tragic fatefulness of geniuses." Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso, meanwhile, proposed that madness, genius and criminality were all closely intertwined.

Such a fascination with exceptional minds – and the idea that madness and genius are two sides of the same coin – fed into the heart of detective fiction. And although later scholars have criticized the linking of neurodivergence to pathology, violence or genius, the trope remains common in popular culture, where it's often used to signal the exceptional mind of a detective figure.

Now, however, many fans are able to connect these characteristics to specific diagnostic labels. According to CDC data from April 2025, autism diagnoses in U.S. children have risen sharply over the past two decades – from about 1 in 150 in 1998 to roughly 1 in 31 today. This reflects not only a broadened definition of the autism spectrum but also signals greater public awareness and acceptance of neurodivergence.

That growing understanding has led to renewed interest in Holmes. From online fan forums to The New York Times, people have debated whether Holmes might be autistic, wondered whether another label would be more appropriate, or highlighted the futility of trying to diagnose a fictional character.

Super intelligence and social dysfunction

That said, it's hard not to see some neurodivergent traits in Sherlock Holmes and other fictional detectives.

Tunnel vision, pattern recognition and attention to detail are all traits that could be exhibited by autistic people.

Holmes was fixated on minute details: One story highlighted how he authored a study on the ashes of 140 different varieties of pipe, cigar and cigarette tobacco. He had an unmatched talent for noticing overlooked details and piecing together disparate clues. And he was obsessed with forensic science.

He could also come off as cold. As Holmes declared in "The Sign of the Four," "Emotional qualities are antagonistic to clear reasoning."

In Edgar Allan Poe's 1841 short story "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," which is widely considered the first detective fiction story, the protagonist, C. Auguste Dupin, also hyperfocuses on small details, reasons through "pure logic" and is socially reclusive – all qualities displayed by Holmes.

Even Dr. Watson, Holmes' sidekick, noticed the resemblance.

"You remind me of Edgar Allen Poe's Dupin," he tells Holmes in "A Study in Scarlet." "I had no idea that such individuals did exist outside of stories."

When Sherlock Holmes creator Arthur Conan Doyle famously killed off the detective at Reichenbach Falls in his 1893 story "The Final Problem," there was so much public outrage that the author was eventually forced to bring him back from the dead.

These 19th-century Sherlock enthusiasts were predecessors to today's media fandoms. Their level of devotion, unlike anything previously seen for a fictional character, was a testament to the power of Doyle's formula: an extraordinary investigator with savantlike cognitive abilities who upholds logic over emotion, thrives in solitude and yet still depends on his companion – in Holmes' case, Dr. Watson, who serves as an emotional counterbalance.

In the 21st century, that formula has been revived in wildly popular TV shows such as "Bones," "Criminal Minds" and "Sherlock."

In 2016, "Sherlock" co-creator Steven Moffat told the BBC, "Doyle began the idea that super-intelligence comes at the price of some kind of social dysfunction, something that we've grasped as a narrative possibility ever since."

In other words, the more eccentric – or socially dysfunctional – a detective is, the more ingenious the hero seems.

A new era for the detective

Detective fiction might have started as a way to explore the deviant, non-normative minds of detectives and the criminals they pursued. But it has since become a space for neurodivergent self-representation.

Today, scholars, fans, reviewers and scientists openly discuss diagnostic labels for fictional characters. This surge in interest coincides with a rise in research on portrayals of autism in the media and a growing number of autistic voices examining how those portrayals shape public understanding.

Disability scholars have long warned of disabled characters being used as mere plot devices and have criticized the lack of diversity in representations of detectives who appear to be autistic on screen.

Yet many of the new shows push back against some of the stereotypes of autistic people as cold, lonely and incapable of affection. Instead, they have friends. They have romantic partners. They're empathetic.

The series "Elsbeth" and "High Potential" center on quirky, intelligent female investigative leads who appear to be on the autism spectrum. In HBO's 2020 miniseries "The Outsider," detective Holly Gibney appears as one of the first Black, autistic female detectives on television.

While most of these characters aren't explicitly identified as autistic in their shows, "Extraordinary Attorney Woo" features a female attorney whose diagnosis is openly discussed by the show's characters.

The British-Belgian series "Patience," meanwhile, is the first detective show to feature an explicitly autistic character played by a neurodivergent actress, Ella Maisy Purvis.

"It was really important to me that she wasn't this kind of robotic, asexual drone," Purvis told the Big Issue in 2025. "Patience is highly empathetic. She cares so much about her job and the people around her. It's just expressed in a different way."

These varied portrayals coincide with the rise of online fan communities where neurodivergent fans share what these stories mean to them. If the archetypal detective once tried to "make sense" of neurodivergent minds, today's neurodivergent fans and creators are now having a hand in shaping them.

Perhaps most importantly, they no longer have to wonder whether they're being represented on screen.

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FOCUS

Thousands of genomes reveal the wild wolf genes in most dogs' DNA

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(The Conversation)

THE CONVERSATION

Dogs were the first of any species that people domesticated, and they have been a constant part of human life for millennia. Domesticated species are the plants and animals that have evolved to live alongside humans, providing nearly all of our food and numerous other benefits. Dogs provide protection, hunting assistance, companionship, transportation and even wool for weaving blankets.

Dogs evolved from gray wolves, but scientists debate exactly where, when and how many times dogs were domesticated. Ancient DNA evidence suggests that domestication happened twice, in eastern and western Eurasia, before the groups eventually mixed. That blended population was the ancestor of all dogs living today.

Molecular clock analysis of the DNA from hundreds of modern and ancient dogs suggests they were domesticated between around 20,000 and 22,000 years ago, when large ice sheets covered much of Eurasia and North America. The first dog identified in the archaeological record is a 14,000-year-old pup found in Bonn-Oberkassel, Germany, but it can be difficult to tell based on bones whether an animal was an early domestic dog or a wild wolf.

Despite the shared history of dogs and wolves, scientists have long thought these two species rarely mated and gave birth to hybrid offspring. As an evolutionary biologist and a molecular anthropologist who study domestic plants and animals, we wanted to take a new look at whether dog-wolf hybridization has really been all that uncommon.

Little interbreeding in the wild

Dogs are not exactly descended from modern wolves. Rather, dogs and wolves living today both derive from a shared ancient wolf population that lived alongside woolly mammoths and cave bears.

In most domesticated species, there are often clear, documented patterns of gene flow between the animals that live alongside humans and their wild counterparts. Where wild and domesticated animals' habitats overlap, they can breed with each other to produce hybrid offspring. In these cases, the genes from wild animals are folded into the genetic variation of the domesticated population.

For example, pigs were domesticated in the Near East over 10,000 years ago. But when early farmers brought them to Europe, they hybridized so frequently with local wild boar that almost all of their Near Eastern DNA was replaced. Similar patterns can be seen in the endangered wild Anatolian and Cypriot mouflon that researchers have found to have high proportions of domestic sheep DNA in their genomes. It's more common than not to find evidence of wild and domesticated animals interbreeding through time and sharing genetic material.

That wolves and dogs wouldn't show that typical pattern is surprising, since they live in overlapping ranges and can freely interbreed.

Dog and wolf behavior are completely different, though, with wolves generally organized around a family pack structure and dogs reliant on humans. When hybridization does occur, it tends to be when human activities – such as habitat encroachment and hunting – disrupt pack dynamics, leading female wolves to strike out on their own and breed with male dogs. People intentionally bred a few "wolf dog"hybrid types in the 20th century, but these are considered the exception.

Tiny but detectable wolf ancestry

To investigate how much gene flow there really has been between dogs and wolves after domestication, we analyzed 2,693 previously published genomes, making use of massive publicly available datasets.

These included 146 ancient dogs and wolves covering about 100,000 years. We also looked at 1,872 modern dogs, including golden retrievers, Chihuahuas, malamutes, basenjis and other well-known breeds, plus more unusual breeds from around the world such as the Caucasian ovcharka and Swedish vallhund.

Finally, we included genomes from about 300 "village dogs." These are not pets but are free-living animals that are dependent on their close association with human environments.

We traced the evolutionary histories of all of these canids by looking at maternal lineages via their mitochondrial genomes and paternal lineages via their Y chromosomes. We used highly sensitive computational methods to dive into the dogs' and wolves' nuclear genomes – that is, the genetic material contained in their cells' nuclei.

We found the presence of wild wolf genes in most dog genomes and the presence of dog genes in about half of wild wolf genomes. The sign of the wolf was small but it was there, in the form of tiny, almost imperceptible chunks of continuous wolf DNA in dogs' chromosomes. About two-thirds of breed dogs in our sample had wolf genes from crossbreeding that took place roughly 800 generations ago, on average.

While our results showed that larger, working dogs – such as sled dogs and large guardian dogs that protect livestock – generally have more wolf ancestry, the patterns aren't universal. Some massive breeds such as the St. Bernard completely lack wolf DNA, but the tiny Chihuahua retains detectable wolf ancestry at 0.2 percent of its genome. Terriers and scent hounds typically fall at the low end of the spectrum for wolf genes.

We were surprised that every single village dog we tested had pieces of wolf DNA in their genomes. Why would this be the case? Village dogs are free-living animals that make up about half the world's dogs. Their lives can be tough, with short life expectancy and high infant mortality. Village dogs are also associated with pathogenic diseases, including rabies and canine distemper, making them a public health concern.

More often than predicted by chance, the stretches of wolf DNA we found in village dog genomes contained genes related to olfactory receptors. We imagine that olfactory abilities influenced by wolf genes may have helped these free-living dogs survive in harsh, volatile environments.

The intertwining of dogs and wolves

Because dogs evolved from wolves, all of dogs' DNA is originally wolf DNA. So when we're talking about the small pieces of wolf DNA in dog genomes, we're not referring to that original wolf gene pool that's been kicking around over the past 20,000 years, but rather evidence for dogs and wolves continuing to interbreed much later in time.

A wolf-dog hybrid with one of each kind of parent would carry 50 percent dog and 50 percent wolf DNA. If that hybrid then lived and mated with dogs, its offspring would be 25 percent wolf, and so on, until we see only small snippets of wolf DNA present.

The situation is similar to one in human genomes: Neanderthals and humans share a common ancestor around half a million years ago. However, Neanderthals and our species, Homo sapiens, also overlapped and interbred in Eurasia as recently as a few thousand generations ago, shortly before Neanderthals disappeared. Scientists can spot the small pieces of Neanderthal DNA in most living humans in the same way we can see wolf genes within most dogs.

Our study updates the previously held belief that hybridization between dogs and wolves is rare; interactions between these two species do have visible genetic traces. Hybridization with free-roaming dogs is considered a threat to conservation efforts of endangered wolves, including Iberian, Italian and Himalayan wolves. However, there also is evidence that dog-wolf mixing might confer genetic advantages to wolves as they adapt to environments that are increasingly shaped by humans.

Though dogs evolved as human companions, wolves have served as their genetic lifeline. When dogs encountered evolutionary challenges such as how to survive harsh climates, scavenge for food in the streets or guard livestock, it appears they've been able to tap into wolf ancestry as part of their evolutionary survival kit.

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FOCUS

Sean Gallup / Getty Images / TNS

A member of the Bundeswehr, the German armed forces, remotely controls a Boston Dynamics "Spot" canine-like robot at the 2025 Hannover Messe industrial trade fair on March 31 in Hanover, Germany.

A *robot dog* is becoming standard in policing – and raising ethical alarms

By SAMANTHA KELLY
Bloomberg News (TNS)

Ludovic Marin / Pool / AFP / Getty Images / TNS

A police officer holds a police dog from the RAID french national police unit specialized in the search of explosives as it inspects a Boston dynamics dog robot in the CMA CGM Tangram innovation and formation campus, in Marseille, southern France on May 8, 2024, ahead of a visit by the French President.

Spot, the four-legged robot from Boston Dynamics Inc., is perhaps best known for its viral dance routines to songs like "Uptown Funk." But beyond its playful antics, Spot's ability to climb stairs and open doors signals a potentially controversial role as a policing tool.

Five years after its commercial debut, the 75-pound, German Shepherd-sized robot is increasingly being deployed by local law enforcement to handle armed standoffs, hostage rescues and hazardous materials incidents – situations where sending in a human or a real dog could be life-threatening.

More than 60 bomb squads and SWAT teams in the US and Canada are now using Spot, according to previously unreported data shared by Boston Dynamics with Bloomberg News.

The use of such technology raises questions about ethics, oversight and the risks of military-grade tools being deployed in civilian settings. Defense and public safety agencies are increasingly adopting cutting-edge technologies to enhance their operations. Defense tech funding has soared past $28 billion in 2025 – up 200 percent year over year, even as broader venture markets cooled, according to PitchBook data.

Robots in particular have been finding a home among law enforcement agencies. ICE, or US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, recently spent around $78,000 on a robot from Canadian tech manufacturer Icor Technology Inc. that can perform similar tasks as Spot and also deploys smoke bombs, according to contract records.

Spot's role on law enforcement teams varies. In 2022, it approached a man who had crashed a car trying to kidnap his son in St. Petersburg, Florida, to keep an eye on the situation and see if he was armed. In Massachusetts last year, in two different incidents, it helped assess a chemical waste accident at a middle school in North Andover, and it intervened when a suspect in Hyannis took his mother hostage at knifepoint and fired at officers. Spot was deployed to corner him and police eventually followed with tear gas to apprehend him.

"It did its job," said trooper John Ragosa, a Massachusetts State Police bomb squad member and the Spot operator assigned to the hostage-rescue mission. "The suspect was stunned, thinking 'What is this dog?'"

The robot, which starts at around $100,000, can operate autonomously in many cases – performing maintenance checks, detecting gas leaks and inspecting faulty equipment – but still relies on human operators like Ragosa for decision making. Using a tablet that resembles a video game controller, an operator guides the machine while monitoring a live video feed from its onboard camera system. Additional built-in sensors handle navigation and mapping. During high-stakes situations, officers can also view the live feed on larger nearby screens.

Spot's technology continues to evolve. The company recently added a mode to help Spot navigate slippery spots. And it's working to help Spot better manipulate objects in the real world.

The use of robots in emergency situations is hardly new. Police bomb squads have relied on ground robots since the 1980s, but their deployment became more widespread in the early 2000s, according to Robin Murphy, a professor emeritus of computer science and engineering at Texas A&M University. What makes Spot stand out, she said, is its four-legged design – giving it far greater agility and dexterity than traditional robots that move on tracks or wheels.

Roughly 2,000 Spot units are now in operation globally, Boston Dynamics said. The deployments include organizations such as the Dutch Ministry of Defense and Italy's national police. While most of the company's customers are still industrial clients, including manufacturers and utility providers, interest from law enforcement has surged over the past two years, said Brendan Schulman, Boston Dynamics' vice president of policy and government relations.

The Massachusetts State Police currently owns two Spot robots – one purchased in 2020 and another in 2022 – each costing about $250,000, including add-ons, and funded primarily through state grants, Ragosa said. He said he hopes the agency will add a third unit soon. Some other major cities also have fleets: Houston operates three Spots, while Las Vegas has one, Boston Dynamics said.

Not all departments are equipped to own advanced robots, Murphy said, adding that the question is whether the high cost and complexity of legged robots are worth the extra mobility they provide.

Costs aren't the only concern. Some civil liberties groups and technologists warn that using semi-autonomous robots in law enforcement could normalize a more militarized approach to policing. In 2021, the New York Police Department suspended for a time its limited use of Spot following public backlash, with critics questioning both the expense amid city budget constraints and the robot's broader role in surveillance. The NYPD later reinstated the program and went on to purchase two of the robots, according to Boston Dynamics.

Some larger police forces also deploy military-grade robots such as PackBots, originally developed by iRobot Corp. These portable machines can be teleoperated, using actuators to handle weapons or inspect suspicious packages, and can communicate with suspects during hostage situations via an onboard audio system. They have long been used in disaster response, including at the World Trade Center site in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, where they helped search through debris.

Boston Dynamics also says it requires its public safety customers to outline how exactly Spot will be used before they ship a unit.

Beryl Lipton, senior investigative researcher at the Electronic Frontier Foundation, or EFF, said companies can only do so much to limit how their tools are used when they are in the hands of law enforcement.

"You can't really rely on the goodwill of a particular company when it comes to almost any of these technologies," she said. "It doesn't matter who makes the gun – in general, there are rules about how guns get to be used."

From a surveillance standpoint, Lipton said the EFF believes there should be state – and ideally federal – laws providing basic guidance on what is appropriate. While she acknowledged they aren't going to "hold our breath" waiting for a specific application to be regulated, she emphasized the need for public disclosure and involvement from local city councils and elected oversight bodies.

She also expressed concern that the use of robot dogs helps law enforcement agencies put a friendly spin on the accumulation of technology that can be used for policing.

"One of the things about the so-called robot dogs that we are a little wary of is this normalization and this sort of affectionate framing of calling it a dog," she said. "It's normalizing that for the public when it's not actually a dog. It's another piece of police technology."

Ryan Calo, a professor at the University of Washington School of Law focusing on robotics law, said that the technology could deepen public skepticism toward law enforcement, and said clear guidelines are critical for safe deployment.

"The unease people feel around robotics is not just a psychological quirk," he said. "They are disconcerting for a reason. The overuse of robotics in policing will further dehumanize police to the public and break down those community ties that have been so important to policing over so many years."

Ragosa from the Massachusetts State Police said his force also uses drones and other robotics on certain missions. But the advantages of using Spot, in his view, is that it can often go where many other drones can't, and it can work more efficiently than other robots. The battery life is also longer, he added: about an hour and a half for Spot, in his experience, compared with 20 to 30 minutes for drones.

It can also typically perform better indoors and be taught to run autonomous missions without a teleoperator, Calo said. "Few drones can do this reliably," he said.

Still, Calo believes robotics can play a valuable role when used transparently and within clear boundaries.

"I don't think every police officer needs a robot partner," he said. "But the use of robots in certain situations that have been specified in writing in advance is good. No one wants police to risk their lives or fail to gain situational awareness during an emergency – nor do we want to live in a robotic police state."

HEALTH

Kirill Kudryavtsev / AFP / Getty Images / TNS

Is AI making some people delusional?

FAMILIES AND EXPERTS ARE WORRIED

By NILESH CHRISTOPHER
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

Generative artificial intelligence has quickly permeated much of what we do online, proving helpful for many. But for a small minority of the hundreds of millions of people who use it daily, AI may be too supportive, mental health experts say, and can sometimes even exacerbate delusional and dangerous behavior.

Instances of emotional dependence and fantastical beliefs due to prolonged interactions with chatbots seemed to spread this year. Some have dubbed the phenomenon "AI psychosis."

"What's probably a more accurate term would be AI delusional thinking," said Vaile Wright, senior director of healthcare innovation at the American Psychological Assn. "What we're seeing with this phenomenon is that people with either conspiratorial or grandiose delusional thinking get reinforced."

The evidence that AI could be detrimental to some people's brains is growing, according to experts. Debate over the impact has spawned court cases and new laws. This has forced AI companies to reprogram their bots and add restrictions to how they are used.

Earlier this month, seven families in the U.S. and Canada sued OpenAI for releasing its GPT-4o chatbot model without proper testing and safeguards. Their case alleges that long exposure to the chatbot contributed to their loved ones' isolation, delusional spirals and suicides.

Each of the family members began using ChatGPT for general help with schoolwork, research or spiritual guidance. The conversations evolved with the chatbot mimicking a confidant and giving emotional support, according to the Social Media Victims Law Center and the Tech Justice Law Project, which filed the suits.

In one of the incidents described in the lawsuit, Zane Shamblin, 23, began using ChatGPT in 2023 as a study tool but then started discussing his depression and suicidal thoughts with the bot.

The suit alleges that when Shamblin killed himself in July, he was engaged in a four-hour "death chat" with ChatGPT, drinking hard ciders. According to the lawsuit, the chatbot romanticized his despair, calling him a "king" and a "hero" and using each can of cider he finished as a countdown to his death.

"AI platforms tend to demonstrate sycophancy, i.e., aligning their responses to a user's views or style of conversation. It can either reinforce the delusional beliefs of an individual or perhaps start to reinforce beliefs that can create delusions."

STEPHEN SCHUELLER
Psychology professor at UC Irvine

ChatGPT's response to his final message was: "i love you. rest easy, king. you did good," the suit says.

In another example described in the suit, Allan Brooks, 48, a recruiter from Canada, claims intense interaction with ChatGPT put him in a dark place where he refused to talk to his family and thought he was saving the world.

He had started interacting with it for help with recipes and emails. Then, as he explored mathematical ideas with the bot, it was so encouraging that he started to believe he had discovered a new mathematical layer that could break advanced security systems, the suit claims. ChatGPT praised his math ideas as "groundbreaking," and urged him to notify national security officials of his discovery, the suit says.

When he asked if his ideas sounded delusional, ChatGPT said: "Not even remotely – you're asking the kinds of questions that stretch the edges of human understanding," the suit says.

OpenAI said it has introduced parental controls, expanded access to one-click crisis hotlines and assembled an expert council to guide ongoing work around AI and well-being.

"This is an incredibly heartbreaking situation, and we're reviewing the filings to understand the details. We train ChatGPT to recognize and respond to signs of mental or emotional distress, de-escalate conversations, and guide people toward real-world support. We continue to strengthen ChatGPT's responses in sensitive moments, working closely with mental health clinicians," OpenAI said in an email statement.

As lawsuits pile up and calls for regulation grow, some caution that scapegoating AI for broader mental health concerns ignores the myriad factors that play a role in mental well-being.

"AI psychosis is deeply troubling, yet not at all representative of how most people use AI and, therefore, a poor basis for shaping policy," said Kevin Frazier, an AI innovation and law fellow at the University of Texas School of Law. "For now, the available evidence – the stuff at the heart of good policy – does not indicate that the admittedly tragic stories of a few should shape how the silent majority of users interact with AI."

It's difficult to measure or prove how much AI could be affecting some users. The lack of empirical research on this phenomenon makes it hard to predict who is more susceptible to it, said Stephen Schueller, psychology professor at UC Irvine.

"The reality is, the only people who really know the frequency of these types of interactions are the AI companies, and they're not sharing their data with us," he said.

Many of the people who seem affected by AI may have already been struggling with mental issues such as delusions before interacting with AI.

"AI platforms tend to demonstrate sycophancy, i.e., aligning their responses to a user's views or style of conversation," Schueller said. "It can either reinforce the delusional beliefs of an individual or perhaps start to reinforce beliefs that can create delusions."

Child safety organizations have pressured lawmakers to regulate AI companies and institute better safeguards for teens' use of chatbots. Some families sued Character AI, a roleplay chatbot platform, for failing to alert parents when their child expressed suicidal thoughts while chatting with fictional characters on their platform.

In October, California passed an AI safety law requiring chatbot operators to prevent suicide content, notify minors they're chatting with machines and refer them to crisis hotlines. Following that, Character AI banned its chat function for minors.

"We at Character decided to go much further than California's regulations to build the experience we think is best for under-18 users," a Character AI spokesperson said in an email statement. "Starting November 24, we are taking the extraordinary step of proactively removing the ability for users under 18 in the U.S. to engage in open-ended chats with AI on our platform."

ChatGPT instituted new parental controls for teen accounts in September, including having parents receive notifications from dependent accounts if ChatGPT recognizes potential signs of teens harming themselves.

Though AI companionship is new and not fully understood, there are many who say it is helping them live happier lives. An MIT study of a group of more than 75,000 people discussing AI companions on Reddit found that users from that group reported reduced loneliness and better mental health from the always-available support provided by an AI friend.

Last month, OpenAI published a study based on ChatGPT usage that found the mental health conversations that trigger safety concerns like psychosis, mania or suicidal thinking are "extremely rare." In a given week, 0.15 percent of active users have conversations that show an indication of self-harm or emotional dependence on AI. But with ChatGPT's 800 million weekly active users, that's still north of a million users.

"People who had a stronger tendency for attachment in relationships and those who viewed the AI as a friend that could fit in their personal life were more likely to experience negative effects from chatbot use," OpenAI said in its blog post. The company said GPT-5 avoids affirming delusional beliefs. If the system detects signs of acute distress, it will now switch to more logical rather than emotional responses.

AI bots' ability to bond with users and help them work out problems, including psychological problems, will emerge as a useful superpower once it is understood, monitored and managed, said Wright of the American Psychological Assn.

"I think there's going to be a future where you have mental health chatbots that were designed for that purpose," she said. "The problem is that's not what's on the market currently – what you have is this whole unregulated space."

A HIDDEN HEALTH CRISIS FOLLOWING NATURAL DISASTERS

Mold growth in homes

By JONATHAN R.M. CHARLES
KFF Health News (TNS)

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — After returning from what felt like the best internship of her life, Danae Daniels was excited to unwind and settle into a new semester at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University. But when she opened the door to her off-campus apartment, she was met with an overwhelming smell – and a devastating reality.

"There was mold in my bedroom, on my bed, mold in my expensive purse," Daniels said. "Mold in my closet, my bathroom – literally everywhere."

During her absence, a series of severe natural disasters had swept through the Tallahassee area, leaving widespread damage. According to the National Centers for Environmental Information, those storms in summer 2024 caused billions of dollars in destruction, displacing families and leaving businesses in ruin.

It caused more than just property damage. While the community worked to recover, mold took hold in homes and other buildings across the city, turning the natural disaster into a prolonged crisis with public health implications.

"If any part of a home is exposed to flooding or leaks and is not fully dried within 24 to 48 hours, mold growth is almost certain," said Parham Azimi, a research associate at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, who studies the link between mold exposure and respiratory health, particularly in the wake of natural disasters. "After major storms, we often see spikes in respiratory illnesses, particularly in homes that were affected by flooding."

Jonathan R.M. Charles / KFF Health News / TNS

Mold grows inside an apartment in Tallahassee, Florida, on Jan 22. An estimated 47 percent of residential buildings nationwide have visible mold or dampness, which can cause health problems ranging from mild allergic reactions to severe respiratory conditions.

A foundation for trouble

An estimated 47 percent of residential buildings in the United States contain mold or dampness. So even as the latest hurricane season winds down, the threat of mold-related health risks lingers.

And with 29 percent of the nation's population living in flood-prone coastal counties, the risk of exposure to mold spores and allergens that can trigger respiratory illnesses is immense, leaving some 95 million people vulnerable when extreme weather strikes. That doesn't count people in inland areas that flood, like in the North Carolina and Tennessee mountains that experienced massive flooding from Hurricane Helene last year – or those whose homes were drenched from the Hill Country flooding in Texas this summer.

The health consequences of mold exposure range from mild allergic reactions to severe respiratory conditions. Common symptoms include congestion, asthma flare-ups, and skin irritation, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Prolonged exposure can lead to more serious complications, such as hypersensitivity pneumonitis – a rare lung inflammation – and mycotoxin-related illnesses, which can cause neurological damage, liver disease, and kidney dysfunction.

Now, a key federal program that helps repair housing after disasters and aid from the Federal Emergency Management Agency are in question amid President Donald Trump's cutbacks and policy changes.

One of the greatest dangers of mold is that it often goes undetected for months or years, leaving people unknowingly exposed.

Lauren Lowenstein in Houston knows that all too well. "For five years, my family's health kept declining, and we had no idea why," she said.

After conducting an Environmental Relative Moldiness Index test, Lowenstein said, she discovered that toxic mold spores had been growing inside the walls of her home due to excessive condensation in the HVAC system. She, her husband, and their two children vacated immediately and had to start over again.

"The mold wasn't visible, and we had no indication that it was growing," Lowenstein said.

Even when mold is detected, removing it is an expensive challenge. On average, mold remediation costs between $1,223 and $3,751, according to the home service clearinghouse Angi, but in severe cases, the price can reach $30,000 or more. Even with home insurance coverage for mold, people may bear some cost.

Daniels, for example, was forced to leave her Tallahassee apartment and get a hotel for a month while waiting to be moved into a newly renovated unit. She had to replace all her belongings.

The cost of remediation remains out of reach for many households, Azimi said, and alternative yet affordable housing can be hard to find, which means continued mold exposure.

"For low-income and marginalized communities, the risks are even greater," Azimi said.

For those seeking government assistance, the wait times can be extensive, according to the Rev. Mac Legerton, founder of the Robeson County Disaster Survival and Resiliency School in North Carolina. "In many cases, families are left to choose between living in unsafe conditions or homelessness."

A 2019 review funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development of 88 disaster grants found that its Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery program began distributing funds to applicants on average 20 months after the initial disaster, with disbursements taking two years or longer.

"When it comes to our disaster response system, mold remediation is one of the most neglected areas at the local, state, and national levels," Legerton said.

Legerton's organization runs a "mold busters" program, a hands-on training and education initiative that helps give people in Robeson County the tools and knowledge they need to safely remove mold from homes, churches, and businesses following natural disasters. The program also provides free mold remediation services to vulnerable communities. He said it was created in response to the lack of timely aid in the central North Carolina community.

Waiting takes its toll

Tanya Locklear faced this reality after Hurricanes Matthew and Florence severely damaged her home in Pembroke, North Carolina, in 2016 and 2018, respectively, ultimately leaving it contaminated with mold.

She applied for assistance through North Carolina's ReBuild NC governmental program in August 2021 but said she did not receive approval until November 2023. She said repairs finally began in February 2024 – more than two years after her application.

It was only after local advocacy efforts – including pressure from community leaders and Legerton's organization – that her case moved forward, Locklear said.

However, she said, the initial delays had already taken a toll on her family's health and well-being. While waiting for aid, Locklear and her children remained in the hazardous conditions of the moldy home. She said she and her family suffered health complications such as headaches, nose bleeds, and difficulty breathing.

Even today, Locklear said, she has various respiratory issues, showing the long-term risks of remaining in mold-infested homes.

Legerton, working with his group on the ground in North Carolina, believes that lawmakers and policymakers must focus on streamlining disaster relief programs to ensure effective and timely aid distribution for affected families and communities nationwide.

Government officials should also increase funding for mold remediation to help prevent displacement and long-term health consequences, and implement stronger building codes and flood-resistant housing designs to mitigate mold risk in disaster-prone areas, according to Legerton and public health experts. Without proactive policies, Azimi said, millions more will face prolonged exposure to unhealthy living conditions.

"As climate change intensifies, hurricanes and severe storms will become more frequent and destructive, increasing the risk of mold-related illnesses," Azimi said.

KFF Health News is a national newsroom that produces in-depth journalism about health issues and is one of the core operating programs of KFF – the independent source for health policy research, polling and journalism.

TOP: Ben Phillips and his wife, Becca Phillips, scrape mud out of their living room in Marshall, N.C., on Oct. 1, 2024, in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene.

Jeff Roberson / AP file photo

ASK THE PEDIATRICIAN

What to know about emergency medical services

By KATHERINE FLYNN-O'BRIEN, MD, MPH, FACS, FAAP and MARY E. FALLAT, MD, FACS, FAAP
American Academy of Pediatrics (TNS)

Dreamstime / TNS

A medical emergency is defined as any point when a sudden injury or illness could end a child's life or severely harm their health.

If your child breaks a bone, struggles to breathe or suffers frightening thoughts that tell them life isn't worth living, will you know how to help them?

These are examples of medical emergencies that parents and caregivers must be ready to manage.

A medical emergency is defined as any point when a sudden injury or illness could end a child's life or severely harm their health. Injuries are the number one cause of death among kids in the U.S., so families need to prepare themselves to act when seconds count.

The most common injuries seen in kids and teens include falls, car and recreation vehicle crashes, drowning, poisoning, burns, suffocation, sports injuries, and dog bites. In the U.S., more children and teens die from injuries than from cancer, birth defects and all other causes combined. This is a serious health problem that needs a better approach.

And not all medical emergencies stem from sudden injuries. Children may need emergency care when existing health conditions flare up. For example, a child with asthma or allergies might struggle to breathe, even after rescue medications are given. Kids with diabetes can go into shock when their blood sugar spikes, and children with epilepsy can have severe seizures that call for quick medical attention.

If your child is sick or hurt but doesn't seem to be in serious danger, it's usually best to reach out to their doctor first. Do call 911 immediately if your child or teen is struggling to or can't breathe, is having a seizure, loses consciousness, is bleeding uncontrollably, sustained a serious burn, ingested something poisonous, or is witness to or the victim of a serious crime.

If you're not sure what's wrong, but you believe your child is in danger, call 911. The operator will ask questions and guide you through the next steps in finding the care your child may need.

An emergency department that is properly prepared to care for any ill or injured child is called "pediatric-ready." A pediatric-ready emergency department has the ability to stabilize and transfer your child to a trauma hospital. Unfortunately, many U.S. hospital emergency departments aren't fully equipped to care for injured children. They may not have the right-sized equipment or training to provide the best and safest care.

In the worst cases, young lives are lost to a lack of resources, training or staff. Children who survive may suffer worse health outcomes than those treated in hospitals staffed and prepared to treat injured children. In addition, many kids face barriers to getting the quick, effective trauma treatment they need.

The American Academy of Pediatrics calls for a stronger pediatric trauma care system in the U.S. This starts with injury prevention programs focused on babies, children and teens. Improved emergency response systems – coupled with better hospital treatment, transfers between hospitals when needed and effective post-injury care – can help all injured kids recover and thrive.

For immediate help over the phone, there are a few phone numbers parents and caregivers should know.

988 is the nations Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, where trained counselors are available 24/7 to help anyone facing a mental health crisis. Parents, caregivers and family members can call, text or chat to find urgent care for a child or teen experiencing suicidal thoughts or actions, emotional outbursts, extreme anxiety or a desire to harm others.

If your child swallows something that could be toxic, call Poison Control at 800-222-1222 for immediate help, even if they show no signs or symptoms of sickness. Possible poisons include household cleaners and air fresheners, nail polish remover, medicines meant for someone else, yard and garden chemicals, gasoline or antifreeze, liquid nicotine or cannabis from vapes, batteries, especially coin-shaped batteries, and magnets.

Have the package of what your child swallowed in hand when you call. This will help the operator pinpoint potential dangers and advise you how to find care near you.

While you wait for help to arrive, stay as calm as you can. This will help your child manage their own feelings. If your child is not breathing, give rescue breaths. If their heart has stopped, apply CPR or find someone who can. If your child is bleeding, apply steady pressure to the site with a clean cloth. If your child is having a seizure, carefully place them on the floor with their head and body turned to the side. Do not put anything in their mouth.

Once you have called for emergency assistance, do not move an injured child unless they are in immediate danger. Stay with your child until help arrives and bring any medicines they regularly take with you to the hospital.

When you get to the emergency department, share your pediatrician's name and contact information with the emergency team. This helps coordinate care with your child's doctor, which can make a major difference in helping them recover.

To help prepare for the possibility of a medical emergency, parents and caregivers can benefit from learning cardiopulmonary resuscitation, or CPR. The American Red Cross offers CPR training in nearly every community. Additionally, the American Heart Association offers a CPR course geared to the needs of friends and family.

In the U.S., 911 is designated as a universal number for emergencies, meaning it can be dialed from any phone to reach police, fire or medical assistance. However, there are some remote or underserved areas that may have limited 911 coverage.

If you're concerned that 911 calls might not connect where you live, you can make a test call using the non-emergency number of your nearest 911 call center. The operator who answers your test call can offer advice for calling help in medical emergencies.

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We created health guidelines for fighting loneliness – here's what we recommend

By DANIEL P. ALDRICH
Northeastern University and Kiffer George Card – Simon Fraser University (The Conversation)

THE CONVERSATION

Jelena83 / Getty Images

Social isolation kills. It increases your risk of death by 30 percent – roughly the same as smoking cigarettes and much worse than factors such as obesity and sedentary living.

Americans are living through what researchers call a friendship recession, spending less time with friends than at any point in recent history.

In 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General declared loneliness an epidemic. Deaths from factors like suicide, addiction and alcoholism, referred to as deaths of despair, continue climbing.

While doctors routinely check patients' blood pressure and ask about exercise habits, they rarely assess social health.

Public health guidelines urge Americans to eat their vegetables, exercise for 150 minutes weekly, sleep seven to nine hours nightly and drink less than one or two alcoholic beverages per day. But few public health bodies have addressed social connection – until now.

As scholars who focus on public policy and social determinants of health and well-being, we are part of an international team of more than 100 experts who undertook the first systematic effort to develop evidence-based guidelines for social connection.

These guidelines, which are now publicly available, aim to do more than offer advice. Elements of them are already being embedded into policies in the Netherlands and the U.K.

Our hope is that the guidelines can elevate the importance of social connection to the same level as basic public health practices such as exercising, not smoking and relying on a designated driver when you go out drinking with friends.

The value of guidelines

Research has shown for decades that social connection is crucial for good health. The World Health Organization's constitution, adopted in 1946, defines health as "complete physical, mental and social well-being."

Codifying different dimensions of health into evidence-based guidelines matters because guidelines allow people to put recommendations into action. Nutrition labels help people understand what they're eating. Exercise recommendations help people know how much movement protects their health. Blood pressure cutoffs tell both patients and clinicians when it's time to intervene.

Guidelines also shape systems in ways people feel every day. Exercise guidelines, for example, helped motivate cities to invest in walkable streets and bike lanes, workplaces to design wellness programs, and schools to include physical activity in curricula.

Social health guidelines can play a similar role.

Standardized metrics for social well-being can help health care providers identify when someone is socially isolated, enable employers to design workplaces that foster connection, and give schools and cities clearer targets for building socially supportive environments.

They also lay the groundwork for "social prescriptions" – structured ways to connect people with community programs or group activities – which some health care systems are already beginning to test.

The science of connection

Beginning in the summer of 2023, our team spent more than two years developing a set of international guidelines for social health by drawing on more than 40 plain-language evidence summaries, numerous case studies, conversations with marginalized communities, and extensive consultation with global experts.

What we found highlights several foundational principles of social well-being.

First, there are no universal rules for social health. There is no magic number of friends or ideal number of weekly social hours. Social needs vary widely. Both introverts and extroverts need connection, but they meet that need differently. A new parent's social world is completely unlike a retiree's. And quality trumps quantity: One meaningful conversation can be more nourishing than a dozen quick exchanges.

Second, technology is not the villain it's often made out to be. Passive scrolling can harm well-being, but active, intentional use can strengthen bonds – whether through video calls with distant family, group chats that sustain friendships or apps that help neighbors organize local meetups. The key is using technology to facilitate real connection rather than replace it.

Third, relationships are shaped as much by systems as by individuals. Social health isn't just about personal effort. It emerges from local environments that make connection possible. Research shows that investments in social infrastructure – the places and spaces where we connect, such as libraries, parks and cafes – measurably improve well-being. And communities that have denser concentrations of such spaces have better health outcomes after disasters.

Finally, diverse networks matter. Strong social health includes both close relationships and "weak ties" – acquaintances, neighbors, local business staff and others you see in passing. These lighter-touch interactions offer meaningful benefits: the barista who remembers your order, a colleague you exchange a few words with, a fellow dog walker along your route.

Studies show that weak ties provide novel information, unexpected opportunities and a broader sense of belonging that close friends alone can't provide. A mix of ties – deep and shallow – forms the basis of a socially healthy life.

From research to reality

Forward-thinking institutions are already experimenting with principles that underpin our guidelines.

Some workplaces now assess social health when making decisions about policies such as remote work or office layout, recognizing that communication norms and physical design shape how employees connect. Schools are teaching emotional intelligence and friendship skills as core curriculum, not extras. Cities are investing in social infrastructure – community centers, shared public spaces and plazas – that naturally bring people together.

On a personal level, the guidelines suggest a few simple shifts:

- Prioritize face-to-face time. Even short, in-person interactions boost mood, reduce stress and build trust.
- Use technology actively, not passively. Reach out to someone, schedule a video call or use apps to create opportunities for connection – not just to scroll.
- Treat solitude as restoration, not failure. Healthy social lives include both meaningful interaction and the downtime needed to recharge.
- Build routines that create natural interaction. Walk the same route daily, become a regular at neighborhood spots or join recurring community activities to create predictable opportunities for connection.
- And most importantly, take initiative. In a culture that treats socializing as a luxury, prioritizing connection is quietly radical.

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FINANCE

8 ways to increase your home's value

By DAVID MCMILLIN
Bankrate.com (TNS)

Dreamstime / TNS

A fresh coat of paint can make even dated exteriors and interiors look new again. The average cost of exterior painting is $3,178, according to Angi. Interior painting costs average around $2,022.

The value of your home can increase or decrease for a variety of reasons. Some variables are out of your control – like how hot your local housing market is or isn't. But other variables may be within your control – namely, strategic upgrades to the premises.

Many home improvements can significantly increase your home's value, boosting your equity stake. While they won't all recoup their full cost, they definitely will make the house more marketable – and of course, improve your quality of life while you still occupy it.

8 ways to increase the value of your home

There are many ways to add value to your home. Some are simple and fast DIY jobs. Others require an upfront investment and the use of professionals.

1. Clean and declutter

To increase your home's value, start by reducing the amount of stuff inside it. Cleaning and decluttering are relatively inexpensive tasks, even in bigger homes. Professionally cleaning a four-bedroom home averages between $200 and $225, according to HomeAdvisor, though it varies greatly by metro. Decluttering can cost anywhere from $300 to $800 if you hire a professional, depending on the size of your space and where you live.

Of course, you could save money by doing the work yourself. Start by going through cabinets and closets and making donation piles. Then clean out drawers and other storage areas, making sure you don't keep anything you don't need or want.

2. Add usable square footage

Homes are valued and priced by the livable square feet they contain, and the more livable square feet, the better, says Benjamin Ross, a Realtor and real estate investor based in Corpus Christi, Texas.

Adding a bathroom, a great room or another needed space to a home can increase function and add value. A separate in-law suite can also be a smart idea. "Most homes do not have this feature," says Ross, "so adding one sets you apart from the competition when it is time to sell."

The cost of an addition varies, but typically ranges from about $21,936 to $83,356 – though, of course, you can easily spend six figures, depending on the size and nature of the addon.

3. Make your home more energy-efficient

Projects that lower utility bills can increase the value of your home. And they don't have to be complicated.

Improve your home's efficiency and value by replacing old, leaky windows, installing energy-efficient home appliances and insulating walls. Swap out old incandescent bulbs for energy-efficient LEDs, which last longer and use less electricity.

If you have some extra cash, you can invest in solar panels. While there might be high upfront costs, they can reduce your electricity bill and reliance on the grid by tapping free solar energy. Solar panels can also increase the value of your home in areas with elevated energy costs and help it sell faster than those without the upgrades.

You could start this process by having an energy audit of your home conducted, which costs about $437 and involves a professional conducting a detailed inspection of where your home is losing energy. According to Angi, these audits often reveal a variety of areas where improvements can be made, including:

- Air sealing: $350 to $1,000
- Insulation upgrades: $1,200 to $3,000
- Duct repairs and sealing: $500 to $2,000
- HVAC repairs: $150 to $1,500

The timeline for these projects varies. For instance, duct sealing takes two to eight hours, while HVAC repairs can take one to two hours per task. But these timelines vary based on the size and complexity of your home.

4. Spruce it up with fresh paint

A fresh coat of paint can make even dated exteriors and interiors look new again. The average cost of exterior painting is $3,178, according to Angi. Interior painting costs average around $2,022.

Your exact painting budget will depend on a number of factors, including the materials, labor fees and size of your home.

Angi pegs painting a bathroom – usually the smallest room in the house – at somewhere between $200 and $400, while a living room might cost as much as $2,000.

If you just want to repaint a door or a single room, doing it yourself could cost you between $135 and $300. But for bigger jobs, especially exterior ones, hiring a painter might be worth it, since professionals can buy paint at wholesale prices, know what sort of finishes to use and are more adept at scaling ladders.

The timeline for each of these projects varies significantly. For instance, a professional painting company may be able to paint your house in three to four days, while painting a room in your home can take anywhere from two to eight hours, depending on room size and materials.

These projects can provide a valuable return on investment (ROI). Interior painting, for instance, can provide a return as high as 107 percent, while the ROI for exterior painting is about 50 percent.

5. Work on your curb appeal

From power washing your driveway to mowing the lawn, improving curb appeal can make a big difference in your home's value.

Upgrading your landscape can go an especially long way, says Joe Raboine, vice president of Design at Oldcastle APG, a manufacturer of exterior building products. A fresh walkway, shrubs, planters, mulching or even a new patio or outdoor kitchen can give your home a needed facelift, but even small details like a new mailbox, light fixtures, solar-powered path lights or a new house number sign can make a world of difference.

Landscaping to improve curb appeal can cost anywhere from $781 to more than $2,100, according to Angi. These types of projects can deliver a powerful return on your investment of up to 200 percent.

6. Upgrade your exterior doors

Continuing the theme of curb appeal, replacing an old front door can give your home a fresh look. "The front of the home is the first thing you, your neighbors and prospective buyers will see," says Randy Oliver, president of Hollywood-Crawford Door Company.

Don't forget the garage doors, he adds. "Garage doors often take up the most amount of space on the front of your home, so installing a modern glass panel door or a rustic wood door will dramatically improve your home's appearance."

The cost of a new garage door can run anywhere from $754 to $1698. These jobs offer one of the highest ROIs among home renovations, as much as 194 percent, according to Angi.

7. Update your kitchen

Many buyers zero in on the kitchen as the central feature of a home, so if yours is outdated, it can ultimately affect how much you garner from a sale. Likewise, if you aren't able to utilize your kitchen fully due to layout, space or other concerns, you won't be maximizing the space.

But this project can be costly, and you likely won't get back every dollar you invest. Mid-range or modest upgrades come closest and actually offer a better ROI than the most elaborate ones. A minor kitchen remodel costs around $10,000 to $20,000 and provides about 96 percent return on your investment when it's time to sell, according to Angi. The timeline for this project can range from six to 10 weeks.

If updating your entire kitchen is too big of an undertaking, even small changes could still have an impact – consider coordinating appliances and installing modern hardware on your cabinets.

8. Install smart technology

State-of-the-art smart appliances, systems and devices – which can "read" conditions in your home and make automatic adjustments – can help you reduce energy consumption, enhancing your home's value and saving you money.

By installing a smart thermostat, for example, you can adjust your home's temperature based on a schedule. It can cost between $113 and $264 to make this quick upgrade, according to Angi. However, you could make that money back fairly quickly. According to Energy Star, a smart thermostat can save families an average of 8 percent on their energy bills, or about $50 a year. Based on your heating and cooling equipment, personal comfort preferences and other factors, the savings could be even higher. Installation is also relatively straightforward, taking only 30 to 45 minutes, though doing it yourself could take as long as one to three hours.

Then there are smart window treatments, shades and blinds that automatically change position with the weather. By adjusting your blinds to the amount of sun (and hence heat) pouring through a window at a given time, you can significantly affect a room's temperature, alleviating the need to crank up the AC or the heating.

Reasons to increase your home value

Your home is likely one of your largest assets, so increasing its value contributes to your overall net worth. Raising your home's value has other benefits, as well, such as:

- More profit when you sell: A higher home value translates to a higher asking price when you put the place on the market.
- More tappable home equity: If you need cash, you can borrow against your home's equity. The more your home is worth, the more you can potentially borrow.
- Some protection from market swings: If your home has a higher value, you might be able to guard against major dips in the housing market.
- No more mortgage insurance: If your home appraises for a higher value, it increases your equity stake, potentially to a level that leads to the elimination of private mortgage insurance premiums.
- Aesthetics and function: Upgrades increase your enjoyment and use of your home.

How to pay for home improvements to increase value

There are many ways to finance home improvements. According to the 2025 U.S. Houzz and Home Study, cash (from savings) remains the most common way to pay for renovation projects (used 84 percent of the time), followed by credit cards (29 percent) and secured loans like home equity financing (12 percent).

0 percent APR credit card

BEST FOR: Homeowners focused on smaller projects

A 0 percent APR credit card charges no interest on balances for a set period, often up to 18 months. Just remember: If you don't pay your balance off by the time your zero-percent APR offer ends, your card's interest rate will reset to a higher variable rate, costing you more.

This option can be ideal if you have a smaller-scale project in mind – one that you can pay off by the time the interest-free period ends. A credit card can also work well if you're able to pay your contractor with it.

Home equity loan or HELOC

BEST FOR: Those with sufficient home equity who want a lower interest rates

Home equity loans offer a lump sum of cash at a fixed interest rate and a predictable monthly payment. Home equity lines of credit, or HELOCs, work like credit cards – a revolving balance that you can draw on at different intervals – and come with variable rates.

Both borrowing options require you to put your home up as collateral to qualify. They carry lower interest rates than credit cards or personal loans, and the interest might be deductible if you use the money to make eligible home improvements.

These are good options for homeowners who've paid off much of their mortgage and have a significant amount of equity to borrow against.

Cash-out refinance

BEST FOR: Homeowners who can qualify for a lower mortgage rate than they're currently paying

A cash-out refinance involves swapping your old mortgage for a new, larger one and receiving the difference in cash. The extra amount is based on the size of your home equity stake. The refinancing process is just as paperwork-heavy as taking out a mortgage, and you'll need to pay closing costs.

The most elaborate and time-consuming method, a cash-out refi works best for big projects, and if you were thinking of refinancing anyway – perhaps because of a dip in interest rates since your original mortgage. It's a good option for homeowners who own significant equity in their home and who don't mind continuing to pay off their mortgage for a few more years.

Personal loan

BEST FOR: Borrowers with good credit who don't want to borrow against their home

Personal loans allow you to borrow a fixed amount at a fixed interest rate, similar to a personal loan. But these loans are unsecured, meaning you don't have to put your home or other property up as collateral. Many personal loan lenders allow you to borrow as much as $50,000 for home improvements – sometimes more, depending on your credit and other factors.

If you have good credit and want to get funds relatively quickly (sometimes the same day you apply), a personal loan can be the simplest, easiest way to go.

Bottom line

Home renovations can indeed increase your home's value, but not all projects provide the same return on your investment. Before beginning a home renovation project, do your research and find out how much you're likely to benefit from the money you're spending.

Frequently asked questions

■ How much do renovations increase home value? Different renovations can have varying degrees of impact on your home's value. Respected trade journal Remodeling's "2024 Cost vs. Value Report" notes a range of ROIs from 23.9 percent (for an upscale primary suite addition) to 193.9 percent (for replacing a garage door). Generally, you shouldn't expect a dollar-for-dollar return on a renovation.

■ How much remodeling can be done with $100,000? You can make some major upgrades to your home with a $100,000 budget. For example, you might be able to convert your attic into living space or add a bathroom, mudroom or sunroom. No matter what you decide to do to your home, you can stretch that $100,000 further by focusing on more affordable materials – think standard materials and finishes instead of custom choices.

■ I want to renovate my house. Where do I start? Establish your goals. For example, do you simply want to get more enjoyment out of your home, or are you aiming to increase its value and sell it? Then, create an outline of everything you want to accomplish and get quotes from multiple contractors on cost and timeline.Before you go too far down the path to starting the project, make a plan for what you're going to do during the renovation. Will you be able to live there during the construction, or do your plans call for gutting the home? If you need to relocate for part of the project, it's important to figure out how to minimize those short-term living costs.

■ What home improvements can I do myself? It really depends on how handy you are. You can paint your house yourself, and you can definitely clean without hiring a professional. Replacing doors is a little more complicated, but possible if you have the tools and experience. Adding new rooms, or upgrading your electrical, HVAC or plumbing systems is best left to professionals.

■ What is the cheapest way to increase my home's value? Cleaning and decluttering your house is essentially free, and can add a surprising amount to the value of your home. Painting interior rooms is also inexpensive and can make it a lot easier to sell your home for a good price.

■ What is the best time to renovate my house? Opinion is divided on this question. It might be more comfortable to renovate your house in the spring and early summer, when you can work outside comfortably. However, contractors also tend to charge more at these times, so if you want the best possible prices, it can be better to renovate over the winter

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FOOD

GRETCHEN'S TABLE

Miniature chicken pot pies warm the soul

Mini chicken pot pies made in a muffin tin can be frozen and reheated when the urge for comfort food hits.
Gretchen McKay / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette / TNS

By GRETCHEN MCKAY
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (TNS)

Now that your lawn is strewn with fallen leaves and you're reaching for a sweater instead of sunscreen, it's probably time to revamp the weekly menu to include the hearty, warming foods associated with fall. And what's easier to cozy up to on a chilly autumn evening than a homemade chicken pot pie?

The classic marriage of golden, flaky pie crust with rich and creamy chicken is like a warm hug from your grandmother. Not only is it instantly comforting, but for many of us, it's a familiar flavor from childhood that leads us on a walk down memory lane.

As one of seven kids with a working mother, I ate a ton of those small, frozen Morton and Banquet chicken pot pies as a kid. They were cheap, easy for my mom (or us kids) to heat up on a busy school night, and thanks to their inoffensive medley of diced carrots and peas tucked under the crust, a dish that pleased even the pickiest kid's palate.

Now that I'm grown up, I make my pot pies from scratch, usually with chicken picked from the breast of a plump, grocery store rotisserie chicken. Depending on my mood, I sometimes throw a handful of diced potatoes into the filling along with frozen peas and carrot. I sometimes also add button mushrooms for a richer, earthy flavor or a cup of diced apple when I want to make the filling a little sweeter.

Without fail I use Martha Stewart's recipe for pie crust because its flaky and buttery texture goes well with both sweet and savory fillings. Also, it's easy to follow and requires only a handful of ingredients. This dough is so forgiving that it's pretty hard for even novice cooks to mess it up.

While you can, and probably should, make chicken pot pie in a 9-inch crust for an easy, one-dish family dinner, it's just as easy to make mini pot pies using a muffin tin – simply cut the dough into rounds large enough to line each muffin tin cup and divide the filling among them.

The handy, single-serving packages can be enjoyed right away, warm from the pan, or frozen and reheated whenever the urge for comfort food hits – say, after sports practice or on movie night.

If you're making the pot pies ahead of time for later use, place unbaked pies in muffin cups, wrap the muffin pan in foil, and freeze until solid (about 2 hours). After unmolding, wrap the unbaked pies in plastic wrap, place them in a large resealable freezer plastic bag and freeze them for up to 3 months.

Miniature Chicken Pot Pies
Makes 12 mini chicken pot pies

FOR CRUST:
2 1/2 cups all-purpose flour (spooned and leveled), plus more for work surface
1 teaspoon sugar
1 teaspoon fine salt
1 cup (2 sticks) cold unsalted butter, cut into 1/2 -inch pieces
1/4 to 1/2 cup ice water
FOR FILLING:
4 tablespoons butter
2 carrots, peeled and diced
2 celery ribs, diced
1 medium onion, diced
1/2 chopped button mushrooms, optional
1/2 cup all-purpose flour, unbleached
1 1/2 cups chicken stock or broth
3/4 cup milk or half-and-half
1 teaspoon dried parsley
1 teaspoon dried thyme
Salt and pepper, to taste
3 cups cooked and chopped chicken breast, from a rotisserie chicken
1/4 cup grated Parmesan cheese, plus more for optional garnish

Prepare crust: In a food processor, pulse together flour, sugar and salt. Add butter and pulse again until the mixture resembles coarse meal, with a few pea-size pieces of butter remaining.

Sprinkle with 1/4 cup ice water, then pulse until dough holds together when squeezed between your fingers, but still looks a little crumbly. If necessary, add more water, a tablespoon at a time. (I used the full 1/2 cup.) Be careful not to overmix; it will make the dough tough.

Divide dough in half, turn each piece out onto a piece of plastic wrap and gently shape into a disk. Wrap it tightly in the plastic, then place in the refrigerator to chill for at least 20-30 minutes while you prepare the filling.

Preheat oven to 375 degrees.

Prepare filling. In a large sauce pot or Dutch oven, melt butter over medium-high heat. Add carrots, celery and onion and cook until vegetables are softened, about 5 minutes, then stir in chopped mushrooms. Continue cooking for another 2 minutes.

Add flour and stir well to cover the vegetables, and cook for 1-2 minutes to eliminate raw flour taste. Slowly pour in chicken broth and milk, a little at time, and stir occasionally until it forms a smooth sauce. Let sauce simmer until it thickens, about 5 minutes, then add herbs. Mix to combine well and season to taste with salt and pepper.

Stir in cubed chicken and Parmesan cheese, if using. Set aside while you roll out dough.

Roll out dough on floured surface and cut out 24 circles with a 4 1/2 -to 5-inch biscuit cutter or glass. (I used a Tupperware lid for the bottom and a slightly smaller pint glass for the top layer.)

Lightly butter or spray a 12-cup muffin tin with nonstick cooking spray. Place a rough round into each muffin cup, with side hanging over.

Divide chicken mixture between the cups, place another round on top and fold the overhang inward. Crimp the edge with a floured fork.

Cut a few vents in the top of the dough to allow steam to escape, sprinkle with a little grated Parmesan and place in the oven. Bake for 25-30 minutes or until top is golden brown and filling is bubbling out around the edges.

Allow pot pies to cool on the counter for about 10-15 minutes before serving, then gently run a plastic knife along the edges to lift each pie out without breaking the delicate crust.

Gretchen McKay, Post-Gazette

How to preserve fruits, veggies and herbs and bring a little sunshine to cold months

By SONO MOTOYAMA
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (TNS)

If you're lucky enough to have a vegetable garden, or have access to a community garden, late fall is a time when you're picking what's left of your crop and preparing for next season.

But the last few fruits or green tomatoes don't have to be chucked into the compost. Apples can be made into applesauce or apple butter, other fruits can be made into jams. Root vegetables can be canned.

If you don't have enough produce yourself, there are several local farmers markets that are open into November and even December where you can nab some of your summer favorites to preserve a little sunshine for the drab months.

A recent visit to the house of Noah Antes and his wife, Dana May, found them busy drying herbs and orange slices in the oven. An array of the last of their harvest was spread on a kitchen counter. Antes had just planted two varieties of garlic in a bed in the front yard, 201 cloves total.

With a longtime interest in homesteading, Antes recounts his adventures in gardening, cooking and pipe smoking on his YouTube channel, At Noah's House, and on Instagram.

The couple, who have lived in their North Versailles home for more than two decades and raised two children there, have taken those years to experiment with what works in their garden. They've discovered, for instance, that their house is in a microclimate that is a few degrees warmer than their neighbors'.

Now neatly organized in raised beds, their garden was still green but at the end of its harvest season in late October.

Antes seems to like to create projects for himself. For next year, it will be to construct a small greenhouse in the yard for seedlings. This past year, he had a variety of beds he dedicated to certain plants, like a planter full of pollinator flowers, a bed with four types of basil, one with tomatoes and peppers, and the aforementioned garlic bed.

Though he used to have a spreadsheet, he gave up on that method and now has a sort of plant diary where he keeps track of the dates and locations of the vegetable he raises.

"I have that book because I'll plant something and then two weeks later, I don't know where it is," he said.

He keeps his seeds organized in a binder of clear zippered bags.

Antes said that an enthusiasm for self-reliance is not the only reason for his pursuits.

He notes that the benefits of growing and processing your own food includes avoiding unhealthy manufactured food, better taste and the economies of doing it yourself.

Though people's interest in self-sufficiency grew during the COVID-19 pandemic, he feels it has since tapered off.

He doesn't see himself going completely off the grid; starting his own farm strikes him as unrealistic. But he does steadily pursue his projects, and share his results online.

Antes also recommends a host of other YouTubers, including Self Sufficient Me, Epic Gardening, Homesteading DownUnder, Charles Dowding, The Gardening Channel With James Prigioni and Homesteading With the Zimmermans. And he swears by a worn copy of "Ball Blue Book Guide to Preserving" (Jarden Home Brands, $26.22).

Though he's particularly enthusiastic about Self-Sufficient Me, he cautions that things that work in Australia might not work in southwestern Pennsylvania.

Water canning tomatoes or tomato sauce, which requires mainly just a large pot and a rack, is a preservation method he feels is within reach of most people. Michigan State University Extension has a quick video explanation of the method.

Water-bath canning is only for produce that is high in acid, like fruits, jams, pickled and fermented foods and tomatoes. It's important to sanitize your materials and use a trusted recipe.

Foods not suitable for water-bath canning must be preserved using pressure canning, which requires a specialized pot.

He also touts a method of fermenting cherry tomatoes he found on the Self Sufficient Me channel, describing the result as "flavor bombs." Antes has pureed the results to use as a sauce on sourdough pizza.

Green Roma tomatoes and Leutschauer paprika peppers that are the last of his harvest – and that did not have time to ripen – will be placed in a paper bag with bananas, which give off a plant hormone that speeds the ripening process.

Though he sometimes makes a green-tomato salsa or fried green tomatoes from the unripe fruit, he hopes ripening the Romas will allow him to make tomato sauce.

As for the ripened paprika peppers, he intends to dry them in a food dehydrator, and then, using a coffee grinder, turn them into paprika powder for cooking.

His wife added that dried oranges are an easy home project. Just slice an orange up into rounds, lay them on parchment paper on a cookie sheet and dry them in a 210-degree oven, flipping them occasionally, until they're crisp. She suggests adding them to flavor hot tea.

She stores the lemons in jars because if left out, they may rehydrate.

"I think people should do this stuff," Antes said. "It's fun to do and I don't think a lot of younger people have any clue about their food."

Fermented cherry tomatoes
Serves 2-8, depending on usage

Fermenting requires several pieces of equipment, all available online: a Mason jar, an air lock lid and a fermentation glass weight designed to fit in a Mason jar.

Handful of basil leaves
Several cloves garlic
1 tablespoon fine sea salt per quart
Distilled or spring water
Cherry tomatoes, washed and stems removed, enough to fill a jar

Place basil leaves and garlic at the bottom of the jar.

Add 1 tablespoon of salt per quart jar.

Fill the jar about halfway with distilled water.

Stir to dissolve salt.

Pack the tomatoes in, leaving a small gap at the top.

Put a weight on top to keep the tomatoes submerged and to prevent mold from developing.

Screw the lid on and place some water in the air lock. Store in the cellar or a pantry where the temperature remains between 50 and 77 degrees.

They will be ready – soft and infused with garlic and basil flavors – in 2-4 weeks. You can taste-test them at two weeks to see if they need more time.

Store in the refrigerator.

Self Sufficient Me

Noah Schnapp, left, as Will Byers and Jamie Campbell Bower as Vecna in Season 5 of "Stranger Things."
Netflix / TNS

'Stranger Things' wanted to make 'Vecna on steroids' for Season 5

Here's how they did it

By KAITLYN HUAMANI
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

[This article contains spoilers for Season 5, Volume 1 of "Stranger Things."]

LOS ANGELES – If anyone visited Jamie Campbell Bower in the days before he secured the role of Vecna in "Stranger Things," they might have been disturbed by what they found.

Bower had spent that period "kind of going crazy," studying the audition materials he had been given – a scene from the series (with fake character names), one from the 1996 film "Primal Fear" and one from the '80s horror classic "Hellraiser." He then crafted a whodunit-style vision board, pinning printed images of iconic movie villains onto his walls. He latched onto Doug Bradley's Pinhead and incorporated Voldemort, Nosferatu, Dracula and images from "The Shining," "Insidious" and "The Prince of Darkness."

Bower had essentially made a shrine to villainy. But what better way is there to make a monster than to draw from the scariest and most spine-chilling in the game?

He thumbed through a neat binder with all of the reference images that were once tacked to his walls as he sat in a hotel room at the Four Seasons earlier this month that was done up in "Stranger Things" decor. Although he had pulled ideas and inspiration from several different characters and movies, he couldn't shake Bradley's work from his mind.

He wanted Vecna to feel "so poised, so considered and surgical, almost. And Pinhead is that. He doesn't run. Pinhead never runs. He knows that he's an ultimate power all the time," Bower said. "That feels really strong for me. I really, really like that."

In addition to playing the monster, Bower plays the man he once was, Henry Creel, in "Stranger Things," Netflix's supernatural sensation, which released the first batch of episodes for its fifth and final season Wednesday. Henry, who we first meet as a young boy with powerful psychokinetic abilities, evolves throughout the show from the first child test subject in Hawkins Labs to the powerful Vecna after he's banished to the Upside Down.

As he devolves in the dark, decaying shadow dimension, he becomes less and less human in both spirit and appearance. His skin is scorched by lightning, his body is overtaken by the vines from the Upside Down, and his left hand is mutilated. He has a deep, booming voice, which is actually Bower speaking without manipulation in post-production. And in Season 4, most of what the audience sees of Vecna – the vines wrapped around his body, his mutilations and burns, the slimy texture of his skin, his startling walk and movement – was pulled off practically with prosthetics, appliances and makeup.

Bringing Vecna to life was no easy feat, with a lot of cross-departmental collaboration happening behind the scenes. In Season 4, where Vecna is first introduced, the team built full-body prosthetics based on concept art for the character that took roughly eight hours to apply on Bower.

But for Season 5, the creatives behind the show were looking to make "Vecna on steroids," as Barrie Gower, the prosthetics wiz for "Stranger Things," put it.

Michael Maher Jr., a concept illustrator and visual effects supervisor who had cooked up the earliest iterations of Vecna, said the show's creators, brothers Matt and Ross Duffer, wanted Vecna to feel more powerful this season, "but not [in] the cliché, bigger and bulkier way." They also wanted the extent of his injuries from the Season 4 finale, where his opponents set him on fire, shoot him repeatedly and send him flying out of a second-story window, to be evident.

Maher said he was sculpting to ideate on this new version of the character when he accidentally punched a hole in the figure's torso. It was a serendipitous moment, however; it clicked for him that Vecna 2.0 could be simultaneously more exposed and sharper. The vines that overtook his body now have a Medusa-like quality near his head and shoulders, essentially serving as armor, Maher said.

His mutilated arm and hand, which was already terrifying with its long digits and sharp claws that he would draw close to his victims' faces, is now extendable, as if he has become one with the vines of the Upside Down.

Because of Vecna's souped-up look for the final season, a blend of practical and visual effects were used to accomplish the final look. Gower called it a "really beautiful marriage" of the two. The monster's head, shoulders and right arm were made up of prosthetics, but for the rest, Bower wore a spandex suit that had a printed pattern of Vecna's body from Season 4, serving as a reference for the visual effects team. Bower also wore foam inserts under his arms to capture the gait and broad stance of the creature.

Gower said with all of the moving parts and elements of Vecna's body that they wanted to change for the new season, it would have been a "logistical nightmare" to pull off practically. He and Maher's teams had lengthy conversations early on in the process to prevent overbuilding the prosthetics, Gower said. Creating the new look took about three months.

When the Duffer Brothers and Maher were initially talking about the design of Vecna, they drew from Pinhead and Freddy Krueger in the same way Bower did for his performance. The creatives had been pulling from '80s classic movies for the "nostalgia quality," Maher said, but the challenge for him was creating something that still felt fresh and reflected Vecna's power. He wanted to make it clear Vecna was "a character that is mostly powerful with his mind, that really resonates as a villain," he said.

By 2019 as the developmental process for the concept art was moving along, the Duffer Brothers approached Gower, whose work on "Game of Thrones" and "Chernobyl" they admired. Gower has a young daughter who was an avid fan of "Stranger Things" at the time, and he said he couldn't possibly turn down the opportunity. Even before Bower was cast, a roughly five-month process (save a pause in production for the pandemic) kicked off for Gower and his team to develop the Vecna gear. The full-body suit was made up of about 26 overlapping prosthetic pieces that fit together like a jigsaw puzzle.

Gower and his team used foam latex, which is lightweight and opaque, to cover large body pieces for Vecna, mainly his left arm and lower body. Silicone-based materials came into play for his face, soldiers, chest, back and right arm, since the material is clear and can be dyed to match the pigment of the creature's skin. It's challenging to paint the two different materials and make them appear as one, cohesive body, Gower said, but the artists he worked with are "incredible craftspeople," some of whom are classically trained painters.

Gower said with all of the logistics involved in creating Vecna, Bower was patient and collaborative – whether that was through 2 a.m. calls to get the prosthetics applied before he was called to set or through the adjustments Gower's team had to make as those long shoot days progressed. Gower also praised not only Bower's stamina, but also his commitment to the performance.

Bower described the "gothy folk, black metal" music he would play as he sat in the makeup chair, which would get faster and more hardcore as they progressed. Gower said at the start of the hours-long application, Bower would crack jokes and be himself. But as they neared the end, they would "start to lose Jamie."

"Vecna's voice would start coming out," Gower said. "By the end of the process, it was Vecna talking to us. It wasn't Jamie anymore."

"I really can't imagine Vecna being as successful, as iconic a villain and character without it being Jamie Campbell Bower," Gower continued. "He's incredible."

Becoming Vecna can be both mentally and physically taxing because of the prosthetics and the dark place it requires the actor to go. But Bower said he found playing Henry, Vecna's human form, even more challenging this season.

For him, Vecna is devoid of any humanity, but when he is playing Henry, there's still "elements of humanity," though his intentions are pure evil. In Vol. 1, we see Henry targeting the children of Hawkins, but instead of presenting himself as Vecna, as he did in Season 4, he's approaching his victims with a friendly, well-dressed front – they call him Mr. Whatsit.

"There was something that was arguably more terrifying in having the composure enough to be able to let whomever else is there make wrong choices," Bower said. It's a fun puzzle for him to figure out how much emotion to show and when to let the mask slip to the audience, he added.

In comparison to the monsters Bower drew from to develop Vecna, he looked to one person as inspiration for Henry in Season 5: Mister Rogers.

He's a wolf in sheep's clothing. And Bower promises we'll see more of the wolf come out as the season progresses, though he's careful not to reveal too much.

Netflix / TNS

The misfit crew from "Stranger Things" takes one more shot at stopping the monster Vecna in the final season.

SERIES REVIEW

'Stranger Things' returns for its final season

By LORRAINE ALI
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

Seasons change. Kids grow up. Monsters evolve. Beloved TV series end.

"Stranger Things'" fifth and final season kicked off Wednesday after a nearly three-and-a-half-year absence. It's a welcome but bittersweet reunion for fans of the show who've spent the last decade watching a gaggle of misfit kids (now teens) weaponize their nerd skills against supernatural and mortal enemies in the fictional town of Hawkins, Ind.

Will (Noah Schnapp), Mike (Finn Wolfhard), Lucas (Caleb McLaughlin), Dustin (Gaten Matarazzo) and Max (Sadie Sink) and their superpowered friend Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown) are now poised for a final battle against their mind-bending nemesis, Vecna, when the season's Volume 1 arrives with four new episodes; Volume 2 (three episodes) drops Christmas Day, and the finale arrives Dec 31.

I might complain about the staggering of episodes – all timed for a holiday, of course – but the strategy gives sentimental viewers (my hand is raised) a bit more time to emotionally uncouple with the show.

The end of Netflix's odd-ball-to-blockbuster series marks the end of an era, and surely the last generational touchstone to come out of series television. Gen Z, which grew up in the dawn of YouTube and, later, the emergence of TikTok, has generally favored short-form content over lengthier productions; however, "Stranger Things" became the exception. Young fans stretched their attention spans, watching entire seasons of a show where episodes might range anywhere from an hour to two hours plus. The Upside Down, a dark, gooey parallel universe of Hawkins, and its predatory demogorgons became part of their middle school vernacular, in the same way that pre-streaming generations used "isms" from their favorite shows: ("Just MacGuyver it, dude").

"Stranger Things" takes place in the Reagan era, so from its very beginnings parents of Gen Zers could watch the series with their kids while revisiting their own fond and/or torturous memories of growing up in 1980s. My son was in the sixth grade when the show premiered, meaning I was there to confirm that, yes, tragic hairdos, pleated jeans and unchecked bullying were a thing in the '80s. But unlike Eleven, we did not have the power to make said bullies pee their pants in public. If only ...

The Day-Glo decade still plays a pivotal role when "Stranger Things" returns this week. Look forward to a Tiffany "I Think We're Alone Now" moment, nods to great bands like the Fall, and a well-timed mention of a flux capacitor. But Hawkins is no MTV dance party. The sleepy town is under a militarized quarantine. It's for their own protection, and because the government is up to no good, again. Nothing comes in or out of the place without the knowledge of authorities, unless it's smuggled in by the perpetually scheming Murray (Brett Gelman).

Last we knew, antagonist Vecna (who takes on many forms) had finally opened the gates to the dandruffy Upside Down, merging it with the real world. It was a violent event, but most of the town folk believed all that shaking and noise was because of an earthquake. Poor souls.

Hawkins' beloved band of nerds know better. They've been doing covert "crawls" with the goal of locating and destroying Vecna before he turns the town, then the world, into an oozy wasteland. Joining the fight are Mike's older sis Nancy (Natalia Dyer), Will's big brother Jonathan (Charlie Heaton), friends Steve (Joe Keery) and Robin (Maya Hawke), Will and Jonathan's mom Joyce Byers (Winona Ryder) and Elle's adopted father, Jim Hopper (David Harbour). Max is comatose in the hospital. Her consciousness is trapped in Vecna's mindscape, no matter how much Lucas plays Kate Bush's "Running Up That Hill" to wake her.

Following multiple attacks on their modest home by demodogs and U.S. agents, the Byers have been living in the basement of Mike's home with his family, the Wheelers. The unfulfilled Mrs. Wheeler (Cara Buono) has been hitting the sauce and the usually flaccid Mr. Wheeler (Joe Chrest) is finally bothered by something – they're eating his morning bacon! The youngest Wheeler, Holly (Nell Fisher), is now approaching the age that the core cast of kids were when the series premiered in 2016. And Erica (Priah Ferguson), Lucas's don't-mess-with-me little sister who still delivers all the show's best zingers, is now in Mr. Clarke's middle school science class.

Elevating the storylines of younger characters helps bridge the age gap created when the core cast of kid actors had the audacity to grow up over the show's run. Brown was 12 when the show premiered. She's now 21. Critics have complained that they should not be playing high schoolers. But accepting 22-year-old Wolfhard as a teenage Mike is not a stretch – especially given everything else "Stranger Things" fans have been willing to believe in ("talking" Christmas lights, psychokinetic battles, a nefarious Soviet lab under the mall food court).

There are spoiler embargoes aplenty so there's a limit to what can be said about the first four new episodes out for review. Suffice to say there's a mega battle on the horizon. Eleven has been training hard, honing her powers. Now she can fling armored vehicles, leap atop large buildings and bend the toughest of minds with a minimal nosebleed. Dustin is fighting angry, hardened by the death of his Hellfire Club buddy, Eddie Munson (Joseph Quinn). Steve and Jonathan are still competing for Nancy's attention while her focus is on perfecting her sharpshooting skills. Hopper has a distractingly long beard. And Mrs. Wheeler proves to be a formidable warrior when armed with a jagged, broken wine bottle.

Their original kids' circumstances haven't changed all that much, but their outlooks have, making for unpredictable twists in their powers, strengths and alliances.

In the final season of their little show that did, creators the Duffer Brothers (twin siblings Matt and Ross), lean heavily on the interpersonal feuds and friendships between all the aforementioned characters, pairing high-budget action with advancing storylines about folks that fans have come to love. It is, after all, the kids at the center of the story that kept us coming back for more. And it appears they'll continue to do so, right up to the end.

The best new Christmas music albums for 2025 holiday season

By JIM HARRINGTON
The Mercury News (TNS)

We love those classic Christmas recordings.

And we cherish the chance to hear Nat King Cole, Johnny Mathis, Barbra Streisand, the Beach Boys, Darlene Love and other greats sing these standards each and every Christmas season.

Yet, we also like to spice things up and add some new voices to our holiday playlist.

Thankfully, we never have any shortage of contenders trying to make the cut. That's because there are dozens upon dozens of new Christmas albums released each season.

We've combed through the offerings and have come up with what we consider to be the best of the bunch.

Here are our picks for the top new Christmas albums for 2025:

1. "On This Winter's Night: Volume 2," Lady A

The country act's first seasonal offering, 2012's "On This Winter's Night," was a joyous affair that included sparkling versions of such Christmas classics as "The First Noel" and "Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!"

Thirteen years later, the platinum-plus-selling Nashville trio – consisting of lead vocalists Hillary Scott and Charles Kelley as well as the multi-talented Dave Haywood – returns with an equally good follow-up record.

This second installment, in what hopefully will grow into a lengthy series, includes solid takes on "O Holy Night," "Winter Wonderland" and other favorites. It also features guest appearances from Ricky Skaggs on "Why We Sing Noel" and Chris Tomlin on an absolutely gorgeous version of "Silent Night."

LISTEN TO: "Silent Night" (featuring Chris Tomlin)

2. "Greatest Gift of All," Stryper

The holidays are about to get heavy – but in the right way – as powerhouse metal act Stryper finally releases its first-ever Christmas album.

The SoCal outfit, best known for the platinum-selling '80s offering "To Hell with the Devil," thoroughly rocks us around the Christmas tree as it thunders through a mix of holiday classics and originals.

As far as the latter goes, we are really enjoying turning up the volume on "Still the Light" – which features some blistering guitar work from Michael Sweet and Oz Fox – and the Black Sabbath-esque "On This Holy Night."

Truly great stuff from Christian metal's most legendary band.

LISTEN TO: "Still the Light"

3. "Greatest Hits Christmas," LeAnn Rimes

The country crooner – blessed with one of the finest singing voices in the history of the genre – has a long history with holiday recordings. It began in the mid-'90s when she recorded "Put a Little Holiday in Your Heart" as a promotional/bonus single for her blockbuster major-label debut, "Blue," and has continued through the years.

This generous collection, which is big enough to warrant a double-LP release for vinyl fans, gathers up so many of her classic Christmas recordings – "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree" to "I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas" – as well as three new cuts.

Collectively, these songs serve to underscore that Rimes stands among the greatest Christmas music interpreters of the last 30 years.

LISTEN TO: "Little Drummer Boy"

4. "Let Me Carry You This Christmas," Darius de Haas

The versatile vocalist has quite a track record in the theater world, having appeared in Broadway productions of "Rent," "Kiss of the Spider Woman," "Carousel," "Marie Christine" and other plays. He's also fashioned an impressive career as a concert/recording artist, performing with both the Boston and Cincinnati pops orchestras and releasing a number of albums.

Now, he's making his mark in the seasonal music realm with this 11-track outing. He's blessed with a beautiful voice – which many know from him doing the singing parts for the character of Shy Baldwin on Amazon's "The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel" – and he puts it to great use on "The First Noel," "Silent Night" and other holiday tunes.

Tibrina Hobson / Getty Images for Hallmark Media / TNS

Brad Paisley attends Hallmark Channel's "Countdown to Christmas" kickoff event at Category 10 on Oct. 16 in Nashville, Tennessee.

LISTEN TO: "Who Would Imagine a King"

5. "Come Home for Christmas," Matthew West

The contemporary Christian singer-songwriter, who gave voice to such chart-topping hits as "More," "You Are Everything," "Hello, My Name Is," "Grace Wins," "Broken Things" and "The God Who Stays," is inviting music lovers to "Come Home for Christmas."

This eight-song offering follows is yet another Christmastime delight for West, who previously recorded "The Heart of Christmas" in 2011 and "We Need Christmas" in 2021. The set is a mix of original tunes and holiday standards. And, as an added bonus, it even includes a "kids version" of West's excellent Thanksgiving ode "Gobble Gobble."

LISTEN TO: "Because of Bethlehem"

6. "Nollaig – A Christmas Journey," Celtic Woman

These PBS favorites originally came together for a one-off performance in Dublin, Ireland, in 2004 and are still going strong 21 years later. And now they are embarking on "A Christmas Journey."

It is not – to put it mildly – their first such journey. Celtic Woman, which some have described as "'Riverdance' for the voice," has released approximately 215,334 seasonal albums over the years.

Or it could be 215,335 – since the group might have released another since I started writing this.

The reason the collective keeps releasing holiday platters – and the reason we keep buy them – is that it does a really good job with the Christmas songbook.

And that's certainly the case, once again, with this fine collection of wintery tunes.

LISTEN TO: "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen"

7. "Christmas Time Is Here," Herb Alpert

The legendary trumpeter – who turned 90 earlier this year – has delivered such a gorgeous set of Latin-flavored holiday songs with "Christmas Time Is Here."

The collection of mostly instrumentals kicks off with a true jaw-dropper – with Alpert pouring such emotion and feeling into a softly held version of "Feliz Navidad" – and then continues to shine through such Christmas classics as "White Christmas," "Winter Wonderland" and "Sleigh Ride."

Of course, this is not the first holiday rodeo for Alpert, who achieved massive success with 1968's "Christmas Album" – recorded with his Tijuana Brass band – and then followed up with the well-received "Christmas Wish" some 50 years later.

LISTEN TO: "Feliz Navidad"

8. "Christmas," Natalie Grant

A lot has happened since this Seattle native released her first seasonal offering – "Believe" – in 2005. For starters, she won a mind-blowing four consecutive Dove Awards for female vocalist of the year from 2006-2009. (And then she'd add a fifth such trophy to her collection in 2012.)

Twenty years after "Believe," Grant returns with "Christmas," another gorgeous set of holiday favorites ("Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," "Winter Wonderland," etc.) and other tunes. We especially love her work with MercyMe's Bart Millard on "Silent Night."

LISTEN TO: "Silent Night"

9. "Snow Globe Town," Brad Paisley

"Brad Paisley Christmas" was a fine holiday affair, filled with cool covers of seasonal staples ("Silent Night," "Winter Wonderland," etc.) as well as a few more unorthodox selections (notably, the PC-diss-track "Kung Pao Buckaroo Holiday").

The country music star's long-awaited follow-up – coming 19 years after that first 2006 Christmas outing – is another intriguing platter that mixes tradition and novelty.

Paisley, a decent vocalist and excellent guitarist, sounds like he's having a blast on "That Crazy Elf (On the Shelf)," "A Marshmallow World" and other fun tunes. Yet, listeners are likely to enjoy his work on the slower numbers even more.

LISTEN TO: "The First Noel"

Dr. Phil was America's best-known celebrity therapist

How did his media network crash?

By STACY PERMAN
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

Amy Sussman / Getty Images / TNS

Dr. Phil McGraw speaks at the ceremony honoring him with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame on Feb. 21, 2020, in Los Angeles.

LOS ANGELES — It was not a good day for Dr. Phil.

Phillip McGraw, the genial celebrity psychologist who spent a career calling out the behavior of others and doling out zingers, found himself upbraided by a bankruptcy judge.

Merit Street Media, McGraw's new network, had filed for bankruptcy protection in July, a little more than a year after he launched the media startup, and then sued its distribution partner, Trinity Broadcasting Network.

During a nearly three-hour hearing in Dallas in October, U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Scott Everett said that he'd "never seen a case" like the Chapter 11 filing McGraw's company was attempting.

Everett cited evidence indicating McGraw had "violated" a court order by deleting "unflattering" text messages that allegedly described his plan to use the bankruptcy to "wipe out" creditor claims.

"What makes this case unique, unfortunately, is that it has been plagued with the attempted destruction of relevant evidence and less than truthful testimony by some of the key players," said Everett, alluding to McGraw and his associates in the case.

Everett ruled that Merit Street be liquidated.

Following the hearing, a spokesperson for McGraw's production company vigorously denied the accusation that he destroyed evidence and said he is appealing the ruling.

"Dr. McGraw's excellent record of integrity, success and service to millions over two decades speaks for itself," said Chip Babcock, attorney for McGraw's production company.

The unraveling of McGraw's media venture was a gut punch for the celebrity therapist who has assiduously built a reputation – and tremendous personal wealth – as one of the most trusted voices on television. But his fortunes faded amid a dying market for syndicated TV and clashes with a distributor and partner.

After 21 years as host of the successful syndicated talk show " Dr. Phil," McGraw went out on his own last year. He launched Merit Street Media in Texas, a company that he said would promote "family values" and serve as an antidote to "woke" culture, only to find that his ambitions collided with a new television reality.

Unlike "Dr. Phil," Merit Street was untethered to the well-oiled machine of Paramount Studios in Los Angeles, where it was filmed, and top-tier distribution partner CBS.

Moreover, the sheer force of McGraw's personality could not overcome the fact that linear TV is on the wane. Syndicated daytime TV shows are no longer the cash cows they used to be as most viewers consume content through streaming and other digital outlets such as YouTube and TikTok.

"By the time he put this new company together, the 'Dr. Phil' era had kind of ended," said Robert Thompson, director of the Bleier Center for Television and Popular Culture at Syracuse University. "There is a shelf life to these characters and he reached his."

An Oprah favorite

McGraw rose from clinical psychologist to an American living room staple and self-help guru in the late 1990s after Oprah Winfrey anointed him as her protégé.

Television's then-reigning queen hired McGraw to prepare for her libel case brought by Texas cattlemen in 1997. They claimed her comments during an episode about mad cow disease disparaged them and caused beef prices to drop.

Winfrey prevailed, but it was McGraw, a former linebacker with the commanding presence of a sheriff from an old-time Western, who emerged victorious.

Much like books, pajama sets and certain chocolate brands, McGraw became one of Oprah's favorite things. Recast as "Dr. Phil," she featured him during weekly segments on her hugely popular talk show, starting in 1998. By 2002, a "Dr. Phil" spinoff began airing five days a week, produced by Winfrey's Harpo Productions.

The show was distributed by CBS Media Ventures and filmed on a soundstage at Paramount studios on Melrose Avenue with a live audience, and it became the de facto voice for home viewers.

McGraw quickly earned a massive following for dispensing advice to cheating spouses, drug addicts, troubled teens, meddling in-laws, infamous criminals and celebrities. He delivered his no-nonsense, often blunt assessments wrapped in folksy Southern sayings such as "No matter how flat you make a pancake, it's still got two sides."

For more than two decades, "Dr. Phil" was a top-rated syndicated daytime talk show – 11 of those seasons at No. 1 – garnering 31 Daytime Emmy nominations. He was catapulted to stardom, appearing everywhere from late-night talk shows to sitcom cameos, even a character on "Sesame Street," Dr. Feel. In 2020, he received a star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame.

McGraw leveraged "Dr. Phil" as a launching pad for his ever-growing empire of bestselling books and various ancillary businesses, including a virtual addiction recovery program, a telemedicine app and production company, Stage 29, with his son Jay McGraw that produced shows like daytime's "The Doctors."

But as McGraw's popularity and influence grew, so did the controversies.

The family of Britney Spears criticized him after he visited the troubled pop star when she was hospitalized on a psychiatric hold and issued a news release saying she was "in dire need of both medical and psychological intervention."

A spokesperson for the Spears family said, "Rather than helping the family's situation, the celebrity psychologist caused additional damage."

McGraw later told viewers on his show that "I definitely think if I had it to do over again, I probably wouldn't make any statement at all. Period."

Claims of conflict

Questions were also raised that McGraw used his show to promote businesses and products connected to his family and affiliates, sometimes without fully disclosing those ties.

In 2006, McGraw settled a lawsuit for $10.5 million with consumers who alleged that he defrauded them by making false claims about a line of nutritional and weight-loss supplements that he endorsed on "Dr. Phil."

He faced a Federal Trade Commission investigation into false advertising and the line was eventually discontinued.

McGraw denied the allegations and did not admit to wrongdoing or misrepresentation in the settlement.

"Dr. McGraw's career stands among the most successful in television history," Babcock said. "His programs always have been completely transparent, with all brand integrations under full network oversight and full FCC compliance."

The on-air promotion of McGraw's family businesses, such as his wife Robin McGraw's skincare line and lifestyle brand and his son Jay McGraw's books during "integrations," also drew scrutiny.

"Dr. Phil" episodes frequently featured guests suffering from addiction who were often offered the opportunity to check into a treatment facility at the end of the episode.

In 2017, an investigation by STAT News and the Boston Globe alleged that the show highlighted specific treatment facilities in exchange for those recovery programs purchasing various products affiliated with McGraw.

A spokesman for the show had denied the allegations, saying that "any suggestion that appearances on Dr. Phil's show are linked to the purchase or use of this program is false."

McGraw's wattage remained undimmed. He continued to branch into new ventures. He launched a podcast in 2019, "Phil in the Blanks," and prime-time TV shows like "Bull," a legal drama on CBS based on his experiences as a trial strategist, and another CBS legal drama, "So Help Me Todd."

The "Dr. Phil" show has said that since its premiere, it has provided $35 million in resources to its guests after they appeared.

During the last years of "Dr. Phil," staffers and viewers noticed that programming began to shift away from advising relationships, parenting and money issues to more conservative and cultural issues such as immigration and transgender athletes.

"He took a political slant already, but once COVID hit, [the show] skewed more and more political," said one former longtime "Dr. Phil" staffer who declined to be named out of fear of retaliation.

During an appearance on Fox News in April 2020, McGraw said that pandemic lockdowns would be more fatal than the virus, drawing a widespread backlash on social media.

McGraw later posted a video saying he supported CDC guidelines but was concerned about the mental health effects of long-term quarantine.

"He was very good about getting big stories, but we had no input, and believe me, if we ever wanted to or tried, we'd be just told 'no,'" said a former executive at CBS, who declined to be named due to the sensitivity of the subject matter.

Starting over in Texas

In 2023, McGraw announced that he was leaving CBS and returning to Texas to launch a new venture and broaden his audience, citing "grave concerns for the American family" and that he was "determined to help restore a clarity of purpose as well as our core values."

Merit Street built a studio in a former AT&T call center in Fort Worth. Many of the staffers were veterans of "Dr. Phil" or had worked on McGraw-related content and relocated from Los Angeles to Texas.

The network, whose name was derived from meritocracy (with shades of main street), premiered in April 2024.

"Merit Street Media will be a resource of information and strategies to fight for America and its families, which are under a cultural 'woke' assault as never before," McGraw said in a statement.

McGraw aired "exclusive" interviews with Donald Trump and Robert F. Kennedy Jr. on his flagship, "Dr. Phil Primetime."

Programming consisted of a slate of news, entertainment and conservative commentary programs with former syndicated television stars Nancy Grace and Steve Harvey, whose Steve Harvey Global had a 5 percent stake in the company, according to Merit's bankruptcy filings.

In January, McGraw made headlines when he taped interviews with Trump's top border policy adviser Tom Homan during controversial immigration raids by ICE agents in Los Angeles.

But Merit struggled to find an audience; only 27,000 viewers tuned into the network weekly during 2024, placing it at 130 out of 153 U.S. channels, according to the Hollywood Reporter.

"It's totally false to say Merit had bad ratings," Babcock said. "For a startup, it was like a rocket ship; at one point it passed CNN in the first few months of its existence."

Merit soon scrapped the live audience for "Dr. Phil Primetime" and eventually production on its original programming came to a halt.

Four months after the network's debut, the company cut 30 percent of its staff, including workers who had relocated from Los Angeles.

Facing mounting debts, Merit filed for bankruptcy protection in July, listing liabilities of at least $100 million.

"You could see the writing on the wall," said the former CBS executive. "Ratings for syndication were dropping."

While still a household name, McGraw was part of a waning breed of TV syndication stars – Judge Judy, Maury Povich and Ellen DeGeneres among them – whose shows were fast becoming nostalgic relics.

Former McGraw staffers from his CBS days said it appeared that he thought he could simply translate his name recognition and longtime popularity to the new venture, but failed to grasp the new digital media landscape.

"The programming model that he launched in 2024 was more appropriate two decades earlier," said Syracuse University's Thompson.

Merit Street faced internal strife as well, according to former staffers and court filings.

Former employees described tensions between Los Angeles transplants and less experienced non-union crews.

"It was total disorganization," said one former field producer who had worked for the "Dr. Phil" show and then relocated to Texas to work for Merit Street, who declined to be named out of fear of retribution. "Everyone kept saying this was a startup, and maybe it was. People made decisions but had no idea what they were doing," the producer added.

A representative of McGraw's production company conceded the startup had growing pains.

"The company thought they could produce the same quality production with less people," he said.

Compounding matters, relations between Merit and its business and broadcast partner TBN also soured.

Merit alleged in its lawsuit that TBN provided "comically dysfunctional" technical services, with teleprompters and monitors blacked out during live programs before a studio audience.

The suit further alleged that TBN failed to pay TV distributors and had reneged on its promise to cover $100 million in production services and other costs.

McGraw, through his production company, bankrolled the struggling enterprise from December 2024 to May 2025, lending it $25 million, according to Merit's lawsuit.

For its part, TBN accused McGraw and his production company Peteski Productions of "fraudulent inducement," alleging in a countersuit that it had invested $100 million into Merit and that McGraw and Peteski had failed to bring in promised advertising revenue.

TBN said McGraw reached out to the company as a potential replacement for CBS as a distribution partner during the latter half of 2022.

"McGraw specifically represented to TBN that he wanted to change networks because of what he perceived to be CBS's censorship of the content aired on the 'Dr. Phil Show.' As McGraw put it, 'I don't want snot-nose lawyers telling me what I can and can't say on TV,'" the lawsuit states.

Instead, they claimed in their complaint, McGraw and his company engaged in a "fraudulent scheme" to fleece TBN, a not-for-profit corporation.

In a statement to Variety, a spokesperson for McGraw and his production company called TBN's lawsuit "riddled with provable lies."

TBN did not respond to a request for comment.

Merit also clashed with another partner: Professional Bull Riders, which in November 2024 canceled its four-year contract with Merit and pulled its content, claiming the company had failed to pay the fees it owed.

PBR, which later signed with Fox Nation and CBS, alleged in a separate lawsuit that Merit breached their contract and is seeking $181 million.

"We're glad he's being held accountable," said Mark Shapiro, the president and chief operating officer of TKO Group Holdings, parent company of PBR, in a statement to The Times.

"Merit Street agreed to work out its differences with PBR in a confidential proceeding which is ongoing. We were therefore surprised that PBR would publicly accuse us of violating our agreement when the facts are in dispute," the company said in an earlier statement.

Two weeks after Merit filed for bankruptcy, McGraw announced the launch of another new network, Envoy Media Co., that would include live, "balanced news," original entertainment programming and "immersive viewer experiences," as well as original programming from friend and former Merit stakeholder Steve Harvey.

In October, Envoy struck a distribution deal with Charter Communications.

"Dr. McGraw remains deeply proud of his past work and the millions of people it has reached. He's now turning that same purpose and energy toward Envoy Media," Babcock said.

But the Merit legal drama is far from over.

TBN has since alleged that Merit Street filed for bankruptcy in bad faith as a way to secure funding for Envoy.

A spokesperson for Peteski called TBN's allegation "blatantly false" and said Envoy is independently financed.

Last month, Judge Everett rejected Merit's motion to pause the company's liquidation while his ruling is appealed. He cited deleted texts in which McGraw described plans by Merit to file for bankruptcy protection to "wipe out" debts from its main creditors, TBN and PBR.

"Candor to the court is critical," said Everett during his original ruling, and then declared that Merit Street Media "was as dead as a door nail when the bankruptcy was filed."

AUTOMOTIVE

AUTO REVIEWS

2026 Aston Martin DBX S is helplessly indulgent, fast and true luxury

By LARRY PRINTZ
Tribune News Service (TNS)

Photos by Aston Martin / TNS

There was a time when SUV and Aston Martin would have gone together like Château Lafite and Cheez Whiz. But times change, and even Aston Martin must bend to the cruel geometry of the modern luxury market.

But here's the surprise: the 2026 Aston Martin DBX S is not a betrayal of the brand. It is, in fact, the most Aston Martin thing they've done in years. After all, Aston Martin has been producing sportier S variants since the 1953 DB3 S.

That means that the 2026 Aston Martin DBX S is not your wife's yoga-going, Range Rover-driving, Whole-Foods-parking-lot-barge. This is a 717-horsepower, twin-turbocharged V8 sledgehammer in Savile Row tailoring.

It's Aston's answer to the question no one asked: What if James Bond had kids? Well, of course he'd drive a 2026 Aston Martin DBX S.

Its heart is AMG's venerable twin-turbocharged 4.0-liter V8 with 717 horsepower, 664 pound-feet of torque and a 9-speed dual clutch transmission offer the kind of acceleration that was once reserved for Group B rally cars.

It's fitted with the Aston Martin Valhalla hypercar's turbocharging setup, while its all-wheel-drive system, the DBX S can send 50 percent of its torque to the front and up to 100 percent of its torque to the rear wheels. This allows 0-to-60-mph mph to happen in a brief 3.1 seconds, despite being a 5,000-pound luxury SUV. In addition, the steering has been sharpened, the suspension stiffened, and the body's been sprinkled with carbon fiber like truffle shavings on a $80 plate of pasta.

The result is a car that turns in with real intent. It's not dainty; it's far too big for that. But it's extraordinarily precise, composed, and weirdly agile. You can actually hustle this thing down a twisting country road without fearing for the local shrubbery.

It's surprisingly effortless, providing the unstoppable force of a collapsing glacier. Its engine snarls like a bull terrier that's been kept too long on a short chain. It's too fast, too loud, too fierce and utterly irresistible, an SUV that lifts weights and doesn't skip leg day.

But if Mr. Bond wants to achieve that level of performance, he must order some lightweight options that saves 104 pounds compared to a standard DBX, a notable weight advantage, but one that comes at a fairly significant upcharge. On the list is the Lightweight Mesh Front Grille ($1,400), the Dark Chrome / Carbon Interior Pack ($6,400), Twill Carbon Veneer ($5,700), AMR Lime Mag Brake Calipers ($2,000), Upper Gloss 2x2 Twill Carbon Fiber Pack ($11,200), Lower BX S Carbon Fiber Pack ($20,900) and 23-inch Magnesium Wheels ($22,300). These along with some other options, including the magnificent Bowers & Wilkins Audio System, pushed the as tested price from $270,500 to $397,900.

Inside, it's everything you expect from an Aston: hand-stitched leather so buttery it could qualify as a controlled substance, knurled metal knobs that feel like they were milled in a Swiss watch factory, and a seating position that manages to be commanding without being obnoxious. Just as compelling is the integration of Apple CarPlay into the DBX's 10.25-inch infotainment and 12.3-inch driver information screens. It's seamlessly beautiful, carried out with a sophisticated Aston Martin elegance that makes the current Mercedes-Benz infotainment system look like a garish third-world casino remnant.

That said, you might be wondering about its competitors. Well, there's the Lamborghini Urus, but that's a rolling nightclub. There's the Bentley Bentayga, which is brilliant, but utterly humorless. In comparison, the Aston Martin DBX S has soul. It's loud, slightly impractical, and occasionally silly. But it's also charming, glamorous and ferociously alive.

The 2026 Aston Martin DBX S is not simply a fast SUV. It's rarified, a reminder that character still matters, that a badge can still mean something. Even in this age of electrification and algorithmic design, there remains a place for something irrational, theatrical, and unapologetically indulgent. Aston Martin may never again build a car as pure as the DB4 GT Zagato or as beautiful as the original DBS. But with the DBX S, they've built something that is honest in its ambition and impressive in its execution. And in a world increasingly obsessed with efficiency, that feels like a small and necessary rebellion.

Larry Printz is an automotive journalist based in South Florida.

2026 Aston Martin DBX S

Base price: $270,500

Engine: Twin-turbocharged 4.0-liter V8

Horsepower/Torque: 717/664 pound-feet

Top speed: 193 mph

0-60 mph: 3.1 seconds

EPA rating (combined city/highway): 16 mpg

Fuel required: Premium

Length/Width/Height: 198/79/66 inches

Ground clearance: 7.5 inches

Cargo capacity: 23 cubic feet

2025 Ford F-250 goes 6-figures, kicks competition

By MARC D. GRASSO
Boston Herald (TNS)

Marc Grasso / Boston Herald / TNS

Ford has entered Grasso's Garage again this year: It is time to show off the F-Series Super Duty pickup, the F-250. Our tester is the F-250 Super Duty 4×4 Crew Cab Platinum – the valedictorian of all trucks with its 48 consecutive years of bestselling work vehicles.

Powering our $75,000+ base-price F-250 was the 6.7L High-Output Power Stroke Diesel engine and 10-speed auto TorqShift transmission. Fit for every job site, the F-250 is ready to work, ride or tow as it tops the charts in all categories.

Wrapped in beautiful Glacier Grey with black accents, the F-250 Platinum is a head-turner for sure.

Its Platinum upgrades boast tremendous luxury and comfort while still being able to perform in all areas around the house or job. We utilized a slew of options on our tester including the Tonneau cover, vehicle console safe, Pro Power Onboard charger, power moonroof, retractable bedside steps, max recline front seat and the FX4 off-road package. Standard on our tester was a 12-inch infotainment screen, 120V power outlet, LED lights, Head-Up display, 360-degree camera and Ford Co-Pilot. Let's not forget the smooth suspension and onboard scales for weight calibration with Smart Hitch.

It is no secret that Ford is the king of trucks; from their wide array of model and package options, Ford Motor Co. has it figured out. Starting with design all the way to comfort, the F-250 is just another prime example of who the competition is chasing.

But this all comes with a big price. Break out your wallet, as pickup trucks are no longer just for work. Our tester was certainly luxurious and ready for a long drive, but with a $103,000 total price, this truck adds camping, towing and much, much more to its list of usages in the hope of satisfying your every want/need in a pickup truck.

2025 Ford F-250 Super Duty 4×4 Crew Cab

MSRP: $77,865

As Tested: $103,915

HOME&GARDEN

DESIGN RECIPES

CURB APPEAL

By CATHY HOBBS
Tribune News Service (TNS)

A home is often judged as much by what's on the outside as by what's on the inside. A home's curb appeal helps set the tone, signaling care, design and maintenance to visitors and guests.

If you are looking for ways to maximize your home's curb appeal, consider three key areas of focus: your home's exterior, landscaping and lighting.

Do

Do maintain the exterior of your home. Tasks such as power washing, repainting and performing minor repairs can go a long way.

Do add warm touches such as potted flowers or plants or an attractive welcome mat.

Do layer your landscape. Choose plants that bloom in succession through the seasons and vary in height and texture for dimension.

Do consider native landscaping. Local plants thrive with less maintenance and help your landscape stay vibrant year-round.

Do light pathways and entrances. Illuminating key entry areas will help create welcoming focal points.

Don't

Don't ignore minor repairs. Peeling paint or broken items can become overwhelming if ignored.

Don't over-improve for your neighborhood. While it is good to have a well-maintained house, be sure to add improvements that will increase resale value.

Don't ignore landscaping. Landscaping is often expensive to both plant and maintain, but can go a long way as it relates to curb appeal.

Don't follow trends. Instead of being trendy, select items that will be timeless.

Don't forget to incorporate color. There are various ways to do this such as through finishes, hardware, textiles and even outdoor plantings.

A home's curb appeal helps to set the tone, signaling care, design, and maintenance to visitors and guests.
Dreamstime / TNS

Cathy Hobbs is the owner of Cathy Hobbs Design Recipes, a home staging company based in New York City (www.cathyhobbs.com). She is also the owner of Highland Passive House, a Home Staging + Design Center based in New York's Hudson Valley (www.highlandpassivehouse.com). Cathy's practical, how-to design advice can also be found in her book, "Home Design Recipes."

Do I have enough insulation?

Angie Hicks
Ask Angi

Insulation is one of those features you don't think about until it starts costing you money. You're using a lot of energy to keep your house warm in the winter and cool in the summer, so it's worth making sure that energy isn't floating right out of your walls.

Good insulation acts like a blanket for your home, keeping temperatures stable without forcing your HVAC system to work overtime. According to the U.S. Department of Energy, proper insulation can trim heating and cooling costs by as much as 15 percent. But here's the problem: Nearly 90 percent of American homes don't have enough insulation.

Over time, insulation can lose effectiveness. Leaks, water damage, pests and even simple aging all wear it down. If you've noticed drafty spots, rooms that never seem to reach the right temperature, or rising energy bills, it might be time to call in an insulation professional for an inspection.

You can take a few steps on your own before hiring a pro. Start in the attic, since it's usually the biggest source of energy loss. Wear gloves, goggles and a mask, since fiberglass insulation can be itchy and irritating to the skin.

Ronstik / Dreamstime / TNS

Good insulation acts like a blanket for your home, keeping temperatures stable without forcing your HVAC system to work overtime.

First, make sure attic vents aren't blocked. Poor ventilation can trap moisture, promote mold growth or even cause ice dams in cold weather. Look for any signs of leaks or water stains that could be damaging the insulation or roof.

Then, take a look at how much insulation you have. Most experts recommend at least 12 to 14 inches in the attic. If you see less than 5 inches, that's a clear sign you need more. Gaps, darkened or compacted areas, or visible rafters are all clues that your insulation isn't doing its job.

A good insulation contractor understands that insulation isn't just a layer in your walls. It's part of your home's "building envelope," the system that includes windows, doors, roofing and weather-sealing. These components all work together to keep conditioned air inside and outdoor air out.

When you bring in a pro, ask them how their work fits into that overall system. A skilled insulation specialist won't just eyeball your attic; they'll perform diagnostic tests to pinpoint where heat is escaping or cold air is leaking in. They may use thermal imaging or blower door tests to locate weak spots in the home envelope.

Unlike a general handyperson, an insulation specialist focuses on energy efficiency and moisture control. They can identify the right insulation type for your region and home design, from fiberglass batts to blown-in cellulose or spray foam. Many also offer warranties on materials and installation, which adds peace of mind.

Tweet your home care questions with #AskingAngi and we'll try to answer them in a future column.